

2016 Roger M. Jones Poetry Contest
Third Place: Anna Learis

Pendulum

1

I have lived for sixteen years.
I have lived for sixteen years and ten months.
I have lived for sixteen years and ten months and twenty nine days.

It has been the longest sixteen years and ten months and twenty nine days of my life.

2

Melanoma is a cruel ailment.
The blotches of brown spread across my hips faster than they can be treated.
The blotches of brown spread across my mother's arms faster than they can be treated.

It doesn't skip a generation.

3

sometimes I kiss people I really shouldn't kiss and let them unbutton my jeans sometimes I leave physics class and walk in circles until I can hear the blood pulsing under my skin because I'm ashamed sometimes I smoke as much as my lungs will inhale sometimes I smoke to quell my appetite sometimes I don't eat because eating scares me sometimes food makes me want to scream sometimes I scream until I can't breathe sometimes I sit in the empty bathtub to stop screaming sometimes I only sleep for two hours at night because I can't make the screams stop

sometimes I don't sleep for days and become slightly delirious and don't remember crying myself to sleep

sometimes I cry about books and about people who died hundreds of years ago sometimes I cry about songs and people who will die tomorrow sometimes I don't cry even though I want to more than anything sometimes I hold myself to keep the tears in sometimes I can't hold everything in and it spills out of me like coffee from the cup that I sometimes spill in the night

4

My father is an alcoholic.
I was raised by beer bottles.
Beer bottles have no place in the life of a four year old.

Is a parent a parent if they fail to parent?

5

My sister is fourteen years old.
My sister is fourteen years and one month old.
My sister is fourteen years and one month and seven days old.

It has been the longest fourteen years and one month and seven days of my life.

6

He was only nine.
The treatment wasn't working.
His parents couldn't afford better.
He was only nine.
The coffin was too large.
He was too small.
He was only nine.
His sister, only five.
His brother, only two.

He was only nine.

7

My mother, the ice queen, never allowed herself to get too close to me.
If she did, I may have melted her.
I was six when I first asked for help with my homework.
She told me to solve the problem on my own.
I have solved my own problems since.

8

sometimes I drink coffee at night to keep me awake so I can't have nightmares sometimes the nightmares come when I'm awake during the night sometimes the nightmares come when I'm awake during the day are they still nightmares if they haunt you at all hours

9

What does a sixteen year and ten month and twenty nine day old know about being a parent?
Not enough.

10

My Gram was the mother I never had.

She never told me my hair made me look like a boy,
She never told me my expanding waistline made me less appealing,
She never told me my scars made me look damaged.

She lovingly combed my hair,
Cooked me all the pasta I wanted,
Traced her fingers over my scars.

My Gram was the mother I never had.

11

I find it funny.
Our love story, a haiku.
Please don't ever leave.

12

Parents, not siblings, should always put young children to bed.

My father fell asleep on the couch before dinner, as usual.
We were out of frozen dinners.
I biked to the store and bought a pizza for my sister with the allowance I had been saving up for Pokémon cards.
On the ride back up the hill, I cut my knee.
I pushed my bike home, holding the pizza.
After feeding my sister, I put her in bed and read her a book.

My father woke up while I was cleaning my wound.
I received no apology.

I was nine years old.
I was nine years and two months old.
I was nine years and two months and four days old.

It was the longest night of my life.

13

sometimes I think of you and feel better sometimes I think of you and feel worse not that you ever make me feel worse but I feel worse when I compare myself to you sometimes I think it's unfair that you're stuck with me sometimes I feel so lucky that you love me sometimes I feel beautiful and flawless and special sometimes I feel ugly and misshapen and worthless sometimes you make me feel better about myself sometimes you try really hard to make me feel better about myself but it doesn't really work sometimes I want you with me sometimes I need space because I'm drowning in my head and I can't tell which way is up and which way is down sometimes you try to give me directions when I'm lost in my head sometimes it works sometimes I'm too lost to hear the directions but I know you're trying to help sometimes I feel alone when you're far away sometimes I feel alone when you're next to me but that's only when I'm stuck in my head sometimes I feel so confident about us sometimes I think about college and I get anxious and cry sometimes I want to grow old with you and blend my life with yours the way the grains of sand blend on a beach sometimes I love you always I love you

14

I had lived fifteen years.

I had lived fifteen years and nine months.
I had lived fifteen years and nine months and seventeen days.

He stopped drinking when I had lived fifteen years and nine months and seventeen days.

15

I tango with death
On a floor of broken eggshells.
The pain sinks in
So cautiously
That I barely notice it's arrival.
I cannot live this way much longer
Or I will crack like the eggshells
On which I trod.

16

My grandmother is bipolar.
As was my great-great grandmother.
It skips a generation.

17

When my grandfather died, I felt a part of me die with him.
The part of me that died was the part that
Sang the Lord praises before every family dinner
Ate buckwheat pancakes every Sunday before church
Bowed my head in prayer before falling asleep

When my grandfather died, so did my spirituality.

18

sometimes I scratch at my skin when I get anxious sometimes I get overwhelming anxiety every day for a week those are the weeks where I wear long sweaters because my arms are covered in bloody scratches sometimes the scratches don't heal quite right and I'm left with the scars my mother dreads so much sometimes I just bite my lip instead sometimes my lip will start to bleed without me even noticing sometimes I leave blood stains on the coffee cups I sometimes drink from in the night sometimes I try to stop the bleeding sometimes I let the blood run down my chin and drip onto my sheets sometimes my boyfriend asks me why my pillowcases are always bloody

I blame it on my imaginary nosebleeds

19

I surround myself with empty coffee cups.
They make me feel comfortable.

I surround myself with gum wrappers.
They make me feel safe.
I surround myself with makeup palettes.
They make me feel pretty.
I surround myself with your letters.
They make me feel loved.

20

I am no artist, but if you let me I can connect the freckles on your cheeks into constellations, I can shade your skin red from my lipstick kisses, and I can draw promises on your back with my fingertips.

21

I last saw her on November 28th, 2014.
Her dementia was getting worse.
She no longer spoke words,
Just counted down from one hundred.
When she got to zero, she would start all over again.
I sat next to her for hours,
Trying to comfort her, stroking her hair the way she used to stroke mine.
When I was leaving, she grabbed my hand.
Her eyes begged me to stay longer.

I left.

Gram died on December 11th, 2014.

22

It is August and we are sitting in our lawn,
hands stained from the wild berries we picked.
You left in a huff,
throwing your bag in the bed of your truck
and driving off so fast that you almost ran me over.

My father swung in and out of my life like a pendulum.

Changing Tides

I am the foaming ocean waves,
and you,
the sandy shoreline.
I like to kiss you every now and then,
but not for long,
for if I stayed,
I would not be a pleasant surprise.

When I leave, I take pieces of you with me.
This is not an attempt to tear you apart.
I like to hold you near to remind myself that I AM LOVED, god damn it.

Every time I come crashing chaotically back into your life,
I am intending to make you solely mine,
but I am no friend of time.

I know I can never stay for long, but I will take every piece of you that I can carry.
I will take your beautiful shells, your rotting garbage, anything you will offer me.
I want to take all of you.

I am so lonely.

Forgive my selfish acts, for I am in love.

I want to be a Cool Kid

I wish I liked black coffee.
Black coffee is for the badasses,
those too-cool-to-care girls,
those genius loners,
those fashion queens.

Black coffee screams,
“I am emotionally cold but also the coolest person you will ever meet”

It represents everything I want to be.

I can drink black coffee, but I never enjoy it.
It's like the beverage's way of telling me that I am not truly a card-carrying member
of it's exclusive cool kid club.
Try as I may to enjoy black coffee,
I always end up with one sugar and one half and half.
The chestnut brown drink is a reminder that
I'll never be as idolized as those kids who just drink their coffee straight
from the pot, no minutes of preparation needed.

I WANT TO BE A COOL KID

Haiku #12

I got to the end
Of the endless coffee cup
Then I refilled it