

# Instructions for Killing the Jackal

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*poems*



Black Lawrence Press

*This collection is dedicated to my parents.*

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## Sweet Bird

Not everyone learns to dress a wound  
at such an early age; not everyone

learns how to cause one or how to  
fish her fingers in for best effect.

No bigger thrill than the feel of skin  
from the inside, as if to say, it's not really deep

after all, and if you drop something in,  
she can fetch it out for you.

Little one gives lessons in idiom:  
what it means to get over someone, et al.

## Note to Slip in Your Pocket, Never Slipped

Did your mother ask when you'll bring a wife,  
purse her lips until they disappeared?  
Did you show her the ceramic bird

then shut it away with the other  
birthday gifts? You say you're better  
off than most married folks you know,

and I want to toss off,  
let's you and me make a go of it.  
You can fill your truck bed with hydrangeas.

I'll dig their holes with my hands.  
Then again, to be honest, I don't much care  
for dirt, so let's scratch the whole thing,

can't we? I never told you about the night  
your friend sang to me as I clutched  
his infant son in my lap and asked

*when's Susan getting back from her sister's?*  
As if my refusal had anything  
to do with him, he shrank and snapped,

you're holding him wrong.  
I don't know how to hold anything.  
I'm trying to say I've only done one thing right,

and that was leave. I'm trying to say  
I can show you how if you'd like:  
Let your wings grow back;

ignore the sores they make  
on your shoulder blades; welcome  
the dun-colored feathers and infection.

## Taking a Punch

Near enough to hear the rough language  
of men, I watched my father and uncles

string an electric fence between yard and field.  
One read the worry on my face,

explained how the shock just pinched  
beasts so big, just told them their limits.

When left alone, I threw sticks at it,  
then grabbed hold, felt my skin snap, released.

That was before I knew to ask if we really feel  
pain differently, when I would tumble from trees

and my brother would swear  
it would hurt less if I didn't cry.

So I didn't. And later when someone I loved  
said he didn't and never had, I managed

to nod, numb myself until morning  
when I learned whiskey's a lousy anesthesia,

overcame self-pity by imagining soldiers  
losing limbs, dying anyway. I would think of them

to keep from laughing during church,  
but it really was funny the way the preacher

believed men could help falling for other men  
anymore than I could have

stopped from grabbing that fence,  
seeing for myself if I were being lied to.

## Fording Calfkiller Creek

*Our better days are ahead*, but she doesn't hear.  
The dog has tired us in circles.

We chose this leg, said we could stomach the foaming,  
the mean streak, said something about not minding the cold.

And isn't that just like us? I heard of a girl who set out  
to bury her brother, found she couldn't lift him, so lifted  
a knife to her body instead. It isn't the same thing at all.  
Now two bodies uninterred.

## A Scarecrow, a Feline, and a Hare

### I

The TB hospital was locked up  
years ago, but quarantine remains

advised and sometimes lobotomy,  
though no one speaks of it

outside certain circles.  
What can be done with so much

real estate—all the tiny rooms?  
Who would like to haunt

the floors with whatever lurks  
in the medicine closet,

long-emptied of laudanum  
and the speculum used

in collapsing lungs—  
what hagridden men and women?

## II

I thought there were stars  
painted on the cinema ceiling

but there were only silver bolts,  
machine-made and sufficient.

The movie was about Stockholm Syndrome,  
though not explicit like the scene

when she kicks his eye out  
with her pastel pump. Lock the doors

from the outside for best effect.  
Do doctors count? Or anesthesiologists?

If you could say, I fell  
for the one administering narcotics.

You can get narcotics in the bathrooms  
of certain bars, but I wouldn't recommend it.

Once I dropped my pill on a stall floor,  
but it must be taken in order.

### III

Water doesn't always mean exit,  
can flow because of slant

and puddle, stagnant  
and not at all what you were after.

The last of the leads, but hurry, child;  
you're not the only one down here.

Your palm along the stones—  
leave blood in lieu of crumbs.

It's easier to try and live  
when something's after you.