AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Sarah Harwell for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing
Presented on May 13, 2009.
Title: Leaving the Body: An Elegy

Abstract approved:

______________________________________________________________

Karen E. Holmberg

The death of a child is, for many, a fear too terrifying to imagine. The poems
collected here explore this difficult loss; they examine the realities that form, and fall
away, after the realization of a parent’s worst fear. Through the poems’ speaker, a
bereaved mother, a multitude of worlds are mapped: the world of grief, of language,
of the body, of love and guilt, of conflicted self-identity, of cultural denial, of
courageous reclamation. What emerges from these poems is an intimate and layered
lyric narrative that negotiates the collapsed boundaries of the public and the
private, the dead and the living.
Leaving the Body
An Elegy

by

Sarah Harwell

A THESIS
Submitted to
Oregon State University

in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the
degree of

Master of Fine Arts

Presented May 13, 2009
Commencement June 2009

APPROVED:

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Major Professor, representing Creative Writing

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Chair of the Department of English

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Dean of the Graduate School

I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

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Sarah Harwell, Author
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Gratitude and thanks to my thoughtful primary readers: Karen Holmberg, the workshop, and committee members. Also, to my family and friends for their love and support. And to god...
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Miles Zen Ra

15 June, 2005-11 December, 2006
you bound
back, toddle
through the night,
against the current
of my raging love
that cannot accept
what remains
leaving the body

and then we left
there was nothing left to do
we left it there

with tubes and wires
and blue blue veins
eyes done brain done
heart done

dressed in a dry diaper, skin
cool when last it touched mine,
already ashen,
chest rising by force
for charity
for another body

his body
on the middle of a huge white bed
so small, so small and dead and there
without him in it
we left.
Machines Lie

Science fools the senses, 
makes us believe that 
the dead still breathe.

    We grind
    our morning
    beans,
    cinder-like,
bone in the cremulator.

Watch the rich drip. 
    Fill cups with sustenance,
    life, support consciousness.

Gurgle.
Foam.


Machines lie. 
Sip. 
Sip. 
Feel sated to the bone.
Hours Before The Circuits Crashed

Your fat little fingers whirled a
universe of salt and sugar, smearing
your lips and more with sweetness.

You ate muffins
Sipped milk
Water

We cuddled. You
curled up in my lap.

You danced. You danced.
We whirled around in circles and
laughed and danced.

You splashed in the tub, drove
boats around that bay. Cried
when I pulled you away.

You ate muffins
Applesauce
Water

You were fine
is what I’m trying to say.

I refuse the memory:

Your sudden, stiff body.
Your ash colored aura.
Vacuum

I’ll have a cigarette I tell myself, after
I vacuum-pack a box of your clothes. After
I seal a little sweater, a pea-stained shirt,
unwrap the blue jumper from the christmas
box. After I suck up all the air—a cigarette.
As if self-abuse were some reward,
apt punishment for imperfection, a salve
for the utter exhaustion of this
task. A long and polluted exultation
that offers no relief, but neither betrays
the foul taste, the lingering odor,
the slow burn of this labor.

These bags are airtight. watertight.
compress. protect. organize.
provide. superior. protection.
bugs. mold. dust. mildew.
Any hazard. Every hazard.
reusable. And preserving

the integrity
of your clothes is important.

It’s all I can do:
fold. refold. pack. repack.
Vacuum up after you.

It seems senseless,
incomprehensible, through
months of tears and silence—
this stupid plastic bag and
all your effects
crammed up. sealed inside.

It’s all more complicated
than the wheeled toy cube
we put together last fall,
with the colored screws
you understood
better than your mother, who tried to give you something more than her love.
Autoptic

On wordless mornings I go to milk,  
fridge around the spaces you are sealed—  
imagine opening you, imagine you open

Mute and cold, mornings compel  
yet I cannot unseal the waxy white  
envelope—the gift-sized cardboard box—

reveal the notarized bold-face  
It explicates the final tone—  
the weight—of your heart
How It Happens

She pushes them out
too soon, in agony and
anticipation. Breathless,
they are lifeless in mid-
October, half-formed,
put in her arms out of
courtesy, removed quickly.

A bullet, a five block ricochet
after a week night opera.

The yellow bus stops and
long arms are just too short
and the world goes silent;
brakes burn and stink as
a solitary red trail wanders across the pavement.

Mallory chases bees into the pool
while mommy makes lemonade.

Unexplained.

Young and done, she hangs in
the pines on a winter morning
floating like a christmas angel.

For twenty years she diapered him;
terminal atrophy began at conception,
finished.

Peter, who, Pop joked, was born
in a boat, baiting hooks, cast
out; sunk under a
surface he knew well.

This is how it happens.
This is how it happens.
A (the) World

Here lies
my love
in a world of words.
With you so few
simple syllables:

cat
ball
ush(brush)
oon(spoon, moon)
bye
eye(like sky)

Onset. Coda.
What did they matter?

Here
lie
in the nucleus
O.
The Critic

*Sylvia got a good start.*

With her sweet white baby,
locked the children behind
the door, left them little,
next to nothing, just
a few sweet crumbs
to see them through.
mournin/wanting

your heart
beats again with mine
chin snug and doubled  fleshy pink
fingers soft as they are new  sweet
huddled skin

to skin  milky breath trailing
the surface  a warm and rhythmic
wind that shepherds us to a shared slumber

my blood
flows to you  inside
me  inside the belly again
you beat and kick to
my hum

eyes closed and basked in brightness
sun pouring over my face as I
lie in the grass

I see you

running  going
growing taller with the trees
laughing  you circle round
my limbs

def dizzily onto my belly
scotch up to my face
peck my face
with divine clusters of kisses

you smile back to me and
push yourself up  you run
away  go play.
Storage

In long blue
halls of daylight

echoes feet
copy concrete

steps a hollow
utterance

bid no reply
but wave back

a curve a smile
set things straight.
II.
the big big box

i wandered around the big box today
for two hours
for the perfect track suit
for—

18 to 24—
it was a bad time
it’s been a bad time
it’s still
a bad time

in the big big box—
18 to 24—
hung in rows before me
where i could not move
the wanting

buying something little
i make like i’ve a home still
like i have walls
like they bring me peace
Funereal

This is brutal. She makes it look lean.
Her dress is steamed meticulously.
Her hair curled. Her spine straightened.

She seats herself in the parlour, tosses
grief casually on an end table
next to tissue boxes. Beside
silk flowers. In decades
they have not moved.

Memory is soaked,
to root, growing
downward and boundless.

A smile enters, then
a voice.
Speaking in the patterns of
the rational world, she says—
I’ve been in better shape,
yes,
thanks for asking—now
about the lilies—
do you think the lilies
are too cramped in that vase?
It Was

Home
together, bodies, minds, embraces
suck the sweet from illusion like
sleepy bears in honey, inside a
hallowed peace

Then she
combs only her own hair,
tucks herself into bed at night.
Wet eyes welt pictures as tears fall
down into a restless black lake
she cannot calm or clear

Then she
treads water, ferocious,
like a peddler pushing a
pestilent pack, she forces
depths down
under shallow breaths,
peddles and peddles
the pressured depths
birth/death
she pushed.
for a day and for a night
she tried and she tried to push him out.
she tried until it was dangerous to try
until there was consensus
that she could try no more:
the cervix would
dilate no more. his head
pressed upwards, the crown
burrowed in her ribs, they discovered.
feet tucked up around ears,
bottom ready to drop.
that day, that day
they cut her open
put her organs on a sterile table
took him out
out of the body the
body cut
open, organs on a table.
November Ending

The park looked bare today.
There, no leaves
left to shade.

The man throwing ball with the boy was your father.
I saw him. He chased after you
like last November when
he was learning how to be a man.

You lead him around
our park in circles, pointing,
at the ducks, laughing, at the sun,
as it shone its last few rays before
fading into an early winter dusk,
until there was nothing left
but cold.

-----

Today the library was warm and stunk
of homeless men sleeping off drink.
I wandered around stacks looking
for a quiet spot
in our library
on a sleepy afternoon,
mooing and meowing
with the neon farm animals,
meandering around the pages
of a perfect world.

-----

In this new place I move remains
around dresser drawers,
battle for space, for the
persistence of the past to quit
creeeping into the now.
Soften, Say The Compassionate Friends*
*The Compassionate Friends is a grief support group operated by and for bereaved parents

This is the word,
the best they've got for
what happens to the
loss, to this timeless stretch
that will outlive me.

Inherently weak, that verb:
to soften. My new friends
could never surrender
the suggestions of that word,
the threats to resilience, to endurance.

Over half my new friends say
they no longer know joy,
sweet—pretty joy!
The capacity for joy—
expunged.

And who can blame them,
those whose sanity hangs on
cliché. It is prudent, really,

that we all not think so much of words,
of the compulsive faith of words,
of the promise and failure of words
to deliver us

from this hard, this untamed
animal that will soften,
so they say,

but never be so soft
as his fresh skin.
Doing The Math

Three hundred sixty-five days.
That’s six pictures each year.
One every two months.
Yes. It is possible.

You’re one hundred and eighty-six pictures.

I can get you through youth. I can get us
to adulthood. I can hang a new picture
every other month.

A hundred and eighty-six.

Ten for every month you stayed.

This is possible.
I can make your months years.
She lives

With the guilt
of being human,
powerless,
and seeing so much
    She knows
next to nothing.
    She screams
at the scattered and
smiling face. The
smiling face. The scatter.
The face smiling. Smiling
all over the floor.
    She hates
the creator
of that face.
The insincerity of that creator,
the manipulation—the want
to withhold—
the whole story. And
yet she picks the smile up.
    She must
must piece it together
again.
    She lives.
Taken.
With his body.
Not refusing breath.
III.
Grass Stains

Through a different passage
it’s all familiar skin

worn and uneven patches,
undone stitches, a form molded
through practice, repetition,
through inhabitance—

Supper’s ready.

Just a minute, he shouts.

She cruises the house,
tosses dirty shirts in a basket,
trips over stacks of books,
pairs of shoes, picks up
a baseball glove. She slips
her hand inside, rubs
her palm against
the rough skin.

Outside, she scans the yard
and, seeing no one, worry
creeps in when suddenly a
curveball comes and in quick
succession she is tackled with
a hug, grass stained knees.

You missed, mom. You did it wrong!
You’re suppose to catch the ball—

At bedtime she stands silent
before the bathroom mirror,
circles the skins of her face
with slow, soft fingertips.
The mirror looks back,
straight at her, a tunnel through 
time it queries: Where, 
child, have you gone? Who 
will you never be?
My Bones

I am told
they are brittle now—
early—like the old
who stoop around
what long is lost—
stand politely.

Stand her up—fracture
resistant. Make her
smile. Make her walk—
execution speed.
Self-Revision

Little girl at five
in the gingham dress,
ribbons in her hair—
that smile names her, look
at the picture—
he looks like you.

I imagine at least
it is how he would have
looked at—
and
now like you—
torn up, pasted together:

you act and act as if
alive in pictures
project until
you've something good and
whole to hang

to give shape
life
to the body

if the light catches right

narcissism is pretty
self-deprecation requires subtlety

you are a litany: an irony, a testimony, company

you are an accordion
of lit-up glossy paper dolls
strung out
on every cell, every wall.

There is nothing you
are not afforded to be
become
will that belly scar rear you
another head?

you are an effigy.
a likeness that names the world whole.

see. you.
she cannot be refuted.
he existed.
look at the evidence.
she proves it.
Denial Of Death

All her lies have
been told—
revealed unveiled.

You stand where you
always have— in
an unending tomb
of possibility. Legs
will not take you far.

The crowned canopy,
a cradle. The green arms of
mother who held you like
mother before— you—
mother, who from necessity
tells well the lies of safety.

In whispers, in dreams
the father loves you so
lets you make lies,
make lies and tell them,
well. *This* life depends on them.
First Song

bring your guitar you
play.
i'll cook.
and we'll build a hut
from the pine and ash
of before
afforest the empty space.

    there is no desire for creation.
    it flows
    from the living.

let us walk in our garden,
in our mossy fern forest,
make our bed and lie low
together, packed earth under,
get high off trees and leaves.
this way darling, run

your calloused fingertips
again
across my skin
along the meridians
of my body.
restring me, pluck
my ribs and make me
a melody, sing again
the memory,
awaken
first vibration.
Between The Walls

When the neighbor has sex
her men never stay.

Feet hit the floor,
a single pound, then the door.

She’s a big girl, my neighbor.
Square shouldered, thick bellied.

When the men leave she cries,
every time,

after every one who took her
just a moment, never more.

Between the walls—
halls of weeping

purge the nakedness,
strip the shame from consciousness,

shrink and slack into blankness.
Midnight and silence bare all.
Timothy

Nevermind.
Before the
sodden breasts
were perfect, as
were the curves
you followed down
and in; inside
was really me and
that hollow of fears
we try
so hard to conceal,
revealed.

And me after
you'd gone,
lying naked
with my belly,
growing big, asking:
what's wrong with me?
Daddy’s Visit

He was a silly daddy. 
The day he came to visit 
he didn’t know which way 
to fasten your diaper.

I left you two alone 
in the bedroom to figure out 
diapers, snaps, socks, to talk, 
you guys, about everything 
he’d missed.

That day you and daddy 
colored on the paper wall. 
Rainbows. Yellow I love you 
scribbles. You brought him 
stickers from your book of 
animals and he told you 
about his dog. You weren’t 
too interested in his dog, who 
lived so far away, and you 
climbed the couch 
to the window, looking 
for the neighbor’s orange cat.

Daddy chased you around 
the park that day. 
I took pictures: 
Daddy and Miles on the slide. 
Daddy and Miles feeding the ducks. 
Daddy and Miles smiling at the camera, 
pointing and laughing, looking 
like mirror images.

That night at dinner, you kept 
dropping your spoon and Daddy 
kept picking it up. It was a fun game. 
We all laughed. 
I broke pita into bites 
and we three scooped 
into a plate of hummus. 
Daddy and I, together,
marveled at your scooping skills,  
mastered well beyond your age.

The drive home was quiet.  
When we arrived,  
Daddy didn't know how  
to get you out of the car seat.  
He almost bumped your head.

I didn't say a thing and you,  
you were busy taking off socks,  
laughing at your silly Daddy,  
at how awkward he was with you,  
who had teeth  
and words  
and called his name.
Lost In Mid—

Nevermind, I said. I know you do.
I always will. But I cannot will it. I tried it when I prayed

In the ambulance.
On the long flight that was suppose to make my point.
    When I begged about the baby. Cried while he was inside me. Held my own heart like nothing would ever be

split apart sewn up buried

    lost and

    never mine. Muted, like the truest love.
Trace

How often do you look
at your face, your form.
Ask questions of
those with no bodies.
Wonder who you’d be if.

You had your father’s nose.

Skin tells stories. Your
hands are artists’ hands,
cracked, chapped hands.
Teeth once were nice,
signs.

You came from a good home.

Your smile belongs
to someone else now. Its
bearing betrays you,
what you wish to hide.

The curves of your body
just resemble you and
disappear
with the pounds

you try
so hard
to hold
on
and

when you look
you say your name,
say your name say
until you are staring,
staring at lines, lines
looking. looking.
IV.
Brokedown Houses

I’ve never seen a crane so close.
The living room shakes and I stand
in the corner clutching your blanket,
watching as a big machine arm tears
its way through the house next door,
crushing the roof, the frame.

You’re digging at the old house
with your plastic shovel, grabbing
little fistfuls of clumped earth,
hoping for a rock, a stone, maybe.

The arm seizes the fireplace,
the drain pipes, a supporting wall;
it scoops up pulverized debris
until dust coats my windows.

You’re hiding in a drawer now,
beneath blankets, pajamas. And
I wonder if you look like rubble,
if little bones burn to dust or
must be smashed, ground
like the bones of grown men.

Lives shake
without warning, leave plots—
they must wait—
Carry Me Ohio

Here is fine and all
so much better than fine when I allow it to be. But
these are moments of rare indulgence, careless moments
when the guard,
wasted,
loses his guard. Then
the disquietude of peace settles in,
washes over me most unlike a rolling wave.

I dream these days of home,
tell myself it’s waiting
to be discovered, again;
home
could happen anytime,
in any moment, I say, never
forgetting:

a full belly, kicking
restlessly around, waiting
for deliverance

home was.

The other day I washed up in my mother’s lap, her
silver hair looking so tarnished. I wanted to tell her, but
the mirror spoke first so I just smiled.
O's

Found around cushions, hidden in boxes, remembered rolling across floors, rocking, rollicking, dropped, picked up, dropped again. Close mid-back rounded Ooo's followed by oh no's. Open. Out.

O's that finished things, made I whole. Librated u's, completed c's, a little l slacked and fused, latched on, wrapped around one and one other, sandwiched between m's. Circle. Source. Infinite addition. Nothing. No. Oh. Let go. Let it go.
Today You Were A Blue Bird

Nearly
clattered into me
on the stoop, minding
my business. You
pecked about, seeking
harvest from the storm.
When little could be found
you twittered, sang my way,
asked me for more.

I've been lazy in forgetting
yesterday
when you were a boy,
sitting in robin-egg eyes,
in undiscovered legs, crashing
little hand to little hand,
delighting in the sudden
thunders: cause. effect.

Perhaps tomorrow
you'll hop the yard,
fall sweetly from a tree,
rush past me in a gust, pour
into my open windows.

I will not forget the thunders.
I promise. I'll remember.
Grief’s Constancy

Even this will end.
Come to be a reality
that soulless vagabond—
time—has wrung
out.

I will be hung dry, left
as a thirst with nothing
to tongue. He will die
again. And time—that indolent
drifter—will leave nothing,
nothing in the wake.
Pruning

My self—
subservient
to the will
that is bigger than me to
the guru like I tried to be
to the god
when I pruned

the vine ground cover,
the fine purple flowers
and guileless leaves, I thought—
the tendrils
spread out in an infinite tangle
would choke,
I thought—
what they needed to be
was like me like my want to be
like the god like the guru like

the little purple flowers,
attached
to mass, not free
from gravity, just free
enough to allow light
through petals, let wind
take them
Maryam

Tell me, mother,
of the last breath
    that drew the body's final strength.
    Did you stand numbly at his feet, stoic and full
    of grace, or
    did you tear at your hems, nails dug into flesh
as you cursed the father, cursed those who
    refused you both mercy.

Oh Maryam,
what must it have been to stand before him, praying
    for death to come quickly, not knowing
    that final breath
    would be your last true comfort.

And after, did you return to Galilee,
    to the dusty paths of your girlhood,
calloused feet beating the bone-
dry earth through the olive groves,
    hammered to oil,
    pressed season by season—
anointing the heads of the newly born and newly dead.

In that old stone house did you take him
    to your breast once more,
    inhale light and tears—
    your babe, he

to whom the ages lament their sins,
    feed on his flesh, repent and
    take comfort with his blood—

    how much you've borne.

Tell me, Maryam, how—
    do you
    hold the grief as love?
Necrotic

This red-dark
pulp, wandering
synapse after synapse
after every clasp is long
undone pounds and
pounds on, covets
form in the void
Notes

Denial of Death
The title is a reference to Ernest Becker’s book by the same name.

The Critic
The italicized text is a reference to Helen Vendler’s opinion, stated December 10th, 2006, in the New York Times, that there is a lack of great poetry about motherhood, but that Sylvia Plath “made a beginning.”

Carry Me Ohio
The title is a reference to the band Sun Kil Moon’s song by the same name.