I think of my grandfather in the ICU. How when my father and I were visiting him and about to leave, he begged my father to call him when he made it home safely. How he’d cried the time my father’s phone had died as he was driving home, called me in a panic, sure something had happened.

But ICU rooms have no phones. Just a window to a dark sky. A curtain for privacy. Just the flashing lights of a silent TV. The sound of my grandfather’s labored breath through the oxygen mask the doctors made him wear but he kept taking off. So on the way out, we asked the nurse to wait 30 minutes, then to pretend we had called her, asked her to go in and tell my 97-year-old grandfather that his boy had made it home.
Bible Belt Gay

My neighbors were forbidden to watch Disney because the company supported “gay” people. It was the first time I ever heard the word. It coiled inside me, rattled its fire and brimstone. I didn’t understand it exactly, but knew it was perverse. Fruit from the tree not to be reached for.

During a lunchtime debate, an oboe player insisted the bible says gay people are going to hell. “Well I don’t believe in the bible then!”

I hissed. A silence followed, everyone’s eyes wide and on me. I took it back, felt my face flush with shame. I understood—I had taken a step too far from the garden. Looked down and saw my naked flesh.

I only had one boyfriend in high school and I cringed every time he kissed my cheek. When I arrived at the dance on his arm, a girl who often teased me said, “Good—we were all starting to wonder about you.”
A girl I played soccer with had a favorite saying: “That’s so gay.” Years later, I watched a home video and my jaw dropped when I heard the phrase come out of my own mouth, the camcorder heavy on my shoulder as I stood in front of a mirror, commenting on how bad my hair looked in the reflection—“So gay, so gay.”

My college professor told me about a lesbian student interviewing for teaching positions. “I told her she needs to make sure to look a certain way when she interviews, or she won’t get the job.” I nodded, still closeted, but seen.

I hadn’t been to a church in years but decided to join my sister. She assured me the church was progressive.

The preacher started in on Eve, on temptation, on the importance of keeping marriage sacred—between a man and a woman. During the prayer, my sister looked at me. The old shame tried to slither inside, but I followed my own commandments by then.

Without a word, we stood up and walked out before the preacher could say Amen.
Ode to my Wife’s Gender

My dearest theyby. You magician with kitchen scissors, coming out
of the bathroom with the coolest cut. Praise your tool-belt and the way
you wear it. Praise the evolution of your pronouns and your closet,
dresses replaced with blazers, button-ups, shiny black boots.

My heart bursts when you are bow-tied and beaming in hot pink pants. Praise
your hands on a guitar or hammer or my thigh. Praise the purple toy car
proudly displayed on our shelf—the afterthought birthday present
from your dad after you’d opened all the Barbies and bows, after you blew
out your five candles and wished yourself a boy, like you did every year. Praise
your joy at being seen. Praise your tears at the dog commercial, or the movie
Wall-E, or when you play “500 Miles” on the guitar and sing it next to me.

Praise your crooked grin. The arch of your eyebrow that punctuates
your speech in perfect rhythm when you’re
telling me a story. Praise the way you cradle
our little dog and sway with him
in the kitchen, his tail wagging,
then pick up all 60 pounds
of our other dog and do the same.
Praise the way you dance—free,
shirt untucked, the last one
on the dance floor. Praise
how you grab my hand
to join you, the way you lead
and follow in equal measure.
Broken Ghazal

after Suzanne Langlois

Maybe needles are slivers of light kissing your body. Maybe x-rays are portraits of outer space, the body a galaxy—maybe the tumor is a Mona Lisa moon. Maybe it’s beautiful. Maybe cancer is a body trying to live forever, cells in frantic creation—a big bang. Maybe my aunt is somebody not cremated, but confettied, a celebration. My uncle, the guest who shows up six months late, after everybody has gone home. Maybe my grandmother’s urn is the bottom half of an hourglass, years collected in a bronze body.

Maybe my grandfather’s stomach wasn’t filled with cancer, but with stars, a whole night sky he swallowed when nobody was looking. Maybe this sickness isn’t in me, or my siblings or parents, or if it is, it’s not the slow-moving guillotine, body as bomb, undetonated. Inevitable. Maybe it’s just lonely. Maybe it thinks of itself as a friend, somebody who will walk up to me on the street one day and say Caroline, it’s me! It’s so good to see you. Maybe bodies are stars in a constellation, dead long before the light reaches us. Maybe we look up and see them dots we connect of the same broken body.