

12-2010

Grit Line

Kimberly Jo Reynolds

Western Kentucky University, kimberly.reynolds@wku.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.wku.edu/theses>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Reynolds, Kimberly Jo, "Grit Line" (2010). *Masters Theses & Specialist Projects*. Paper 1095.
<http://digitalcommons.wku.edu/theses/1095>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by TopSCHOLAR®. It has been accepted for inclusion in Masters Theses & Specialist Projects by an authorized administrator of TopSCHOLAR®. For more information, please contact topscholar@wku.edu.

GRIT LINE

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English

Western Kentucky University

Bowling Green, Kentucky

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

By

Kimberly Jo Reynolds

December 2010

GRIT LINE

Date Recommended 12-2-10

Tom C. Hurley

Director of Thesis

Doris TIGBY

Deborah A. Logan

Richard H. Bowker Dec 15, 2010

Dean, Graduate Studies and Research

Date

Acknowledgments:

“Germination,” “Ice Fishing,” “Revelation of Ruin,” and “The Bone Betrays Eve”

forthcoming in *The Poetry Gymnasium*. By Tom C. Hunley. Jefferson, NC:

McFarland & Co., Inc., 2012.

“Medical Record.” *Zephyrus* (2009): 49-51.

“The Whippoorwill.” *Zephyrus* (2009): 48.

“Germination.” *Zephyrus* (2008): 46.

“God Will Not Let Us Be Champions.” *North Central Review* (2008): 76-80.

“Joan of Arc Swaps Scissors for a Sword” (2008). *Annual Writing Contest*. Paper 1.

<http://digitalcommons.wku.edu/ws_contest/1>.

“Ice Fishing.” *Prairie Margins* (2008): 13-14.

“Birthing Pains.” *JAR* (2008): not yet printed.

“Ice Fishing.” *Rise Over Run Magazine* (2008). *Art*.

<<http://www.riseoverrunmag.com/archives/257/ice-fishing>>.

“Birthing Pains.” *Zephyrus* (2007): 12-13.

“Poem I Planned My Escape To.” *Zephyrus* (2007): 34-35.

“God Will Not Let Us Be Champions.” *Zephyrus* (2007): 53-57.

“Apocalyptic Love Song.” *Zephyrus: Centennial Edition* (2006): 9.

Many thanks to Western Kentucky University (especially the English Department and Women’s Studies). Gracious thanks to Tom Hunley, Dale Rigby, and Deborah Logan for their invaluable wisdom, guidance, and criticism.

For my family and partner in crime, Scott

Table of Contents

Where the South Crawls

Grit Line	4
The Word, the Stork, and the Egg	6
Tapping	8
Birthing Pains	9
The Sonnet Who Wanted Her Mother	10
A Snapshot of My Grandfather and His Prized Crop	11
Cadillac Square	12
The Day-Trippers	13
Phantom Pains	14
Ice Fishing	15

Doctor's Appointment

Medical Record	17
Prescription Facts	19

The Skinless Poems

The Pen Is Longing to be Touched	22
Write and Wrong	24
Germination	25
Final Draft	26
The Whippoorwill	28
The Skinless Poem	29
Twittering Machine	31

The Other Woman	32
Emoticons	33
Follow Up	
Feet First	35
Book of Water	37
Bacon in God's Frying Pan	
Swan Song Sonnet	39
Man Made	40
The Bone Betrays Eve	41
The Naming of Things	42
Birth of the Medusa	43
Apocalyptic Love Song	44
Joan of Arc Swaps Scissors for a Sword	45
Revelation of Ruin	46
Poem I Planned my Escape To	47
Oh, Ophelia!	48
Love Backslide (Your Love Is Like an Unforgiven Sin)	49
A Relative Translation of Heaven	51
Zombie Weather Report	52
New Orleans, 2009	53
God Will Not Let Us Be Champions	54

Where the South Crawls

Grit Line

Grit Line refers to the Mason-Dixon Line; South of the Grit Line, grits are served with breakfast, instead of hash browns. Refers also to grit, as in a hard sharp granule (as of sand). Refers also to grit, as in a firmness of mind or spirit: unyielding courage.

Below the grit line, in the foothills of Appalachia
 where the south crawls, God is made
 of sterner stuff. *The Lord gives, and the Lord takes*
away. And when God won't speak to us,
 we turn our eyes toward the sky.

My grandpa can see coming rain in the entrails of a red
 sunset, can smell a storm in the electric air, can call birds
 from the trees with a *chchch* hissed between his teeth.

And Thoreau says we *lead lives of quiet desperation.*
 But we've done too much time on our knees,
 clamoring for the empty ear of God. Maybe it's because
 we speak in slow drawls and won't tuck our long "i"
 between our teeth. When God won't speak to us,
 we turn our eyes toward dirt.

Grandpa can read winter in the dark waist of a woolly worm,
 can see thunder and lightning in a straight line of ants, can speak
 the language of cows with a *suey* song from his hallowed mouth.

And the Lord takes away. Uproots us from school
 to toil in the dirt by the sweat of our brows. We spell
 our names with an "X," and plow the ground in deep
 mounds for our food and our dead. When God won't speak
 to us, we turn our eyes toward ourselves.

I chased chickens amongst the apple trees. My lithe legs
 almost kept time with little Blue Boy's, his red plumage
 flickered in the slant of sun, my hand always reached

And the Lord takes away with an early frost. Plants
 winter against our doors. Covers our wolves
 with the sheep's warm clothes, and digs rabbit holes
 for those polished wolves. When God won't speak
 to us, we turn our eyes

but not quite far enough. My grandma told me that if I could just
 sprinkle some salt on his tail, I could catch him. She could break
 a chicken's neck with one wide arc of her arm, clean it, and cook it

And the Lord takes away with another bill to pay. Buries
our husbands, brothers, and sons in the coal mine, while He
digs rabbit holes for those polished wolves. And we've dreamt
of death since the day we were born. When God won't
speak to us, we turn our eyes

without flinching. She'd boil cabbage down until it filled
mason jars and swelled the house with its stench that lingered
in my clothes and drew greenflies to line the window

below the grit line, in the foothills of Appalachia where
the south crawls, *The Lord gives, and the Lord takes away*.
Makes a place for us to lie, way down low, while He digs
rabbit holes for those polished wolves. When God won't speak
for us, we turn our eyes toward dust.

The Word, the Stork, and the Egg

My father and mother made me with their mouths,
just like God, uttering creation from a click
of the tongue. And long before I knew about the pink
clam, the squirming worm, and the backseat
of an AMC Marlin at seventeen, my friend told us
her mom swallowed a watermelon seed that grew
into a baby, and another believed storks dropped
babies from their beaks in pink or blue bundles. But
I knew I came from my mother's body—we shared
the same small, starfish hands that wriggled toward
something sturdier to clutch in the crush of current.
I began as a word my father and mother chanted in
unison, an Athena sprung from the head of love.

And I told the girls that my parents' word took root
and formed a perfect white egg in my mother's
mouth. At first I was very small, and my mother
could balance the egg between her jaw and her
teeth, and all I could think of was love and sleep.
And sometimes I got cold and my egg clanked
against her teeth, then my mother's voice covered me
with pink blankets. My father whispered about my body
while my mother slept: he gave me his eyes in blue,
his long arms, his red heart, her voice like a bell,
her thin legs, her pale hands. I stored up their stories
and made them mine, and my egg was littered with glass
slippers, my grandfather's purple heart, poison apples,
the broken body of Christ, straw spun into gold, my
grandmother's rose bushes, a trail of breadcrumbs.

And I grew within the contours of that frail shell
behind the protection of my mother's teeth, until
my own babbling broke the membrane and she
was forced to spit the cracked egg and me out.
I'm not sure my friends bought it, but I preferred
my theory to the one about storks. And though her
slender fingers swallowed my own when my mother
and I pressed our hands together and made our pink
palms kiss, they were the same sea star shape. I
asked her the secret about the storks when I was
washing her back. She looked like a dark Aphrodite
in the bath, the swell of her body obscured by water.

She pinned the russet tangle of curls atop her head and revealed a hidden mole on the nape of her neck. I imagined that mole as a stone that marked a secret path through the forest of her hair, while I swirled the washcloth in circles on her back and traced soap starfish and storks and anchors that washed away with one splash of water. I was afraid to think of her body growing old, lines etched deep in her starfish hands, breasts yawning with age, how her bone house would collapse in on itself, so I asked her about the stork and the egg and the word instead. She threw her head back and laughed and when she opened her mouth, how I wanted to be behind those teeth again.

Tapping

I come from the smooth black barrel of a loaded gun,
from thirteen panting hours of labor with sparrows
tapping and my mother's hair undone. From the tomb
womb the doctors said couldn't house the young.
But this crack in my clavicle is a testimony of my passage;
even then I was given to bend. Christ knows I was born
on my knees before a bare altar in the season of bees.
And my grandma still tells stories of my first viewing,
how all the nurses and women cried, *Elvis has died*,
me still in my pink swaddling. I come from the dirt
under my father's fingernails, from the songs he would sing
about the long suffering, the lion, the lamb. I come from
the grit of trailer park ground, from *was lost but now
I'm found*. Christ knows how I've cried to the hallowed,
hollowed, and empty ear of God, how I've tried to escape
the Bible and the booze, how I'd use the word, a dark bird
uncomfortable with cages. How the pages of my life have been
written in water. Christ knows I've been a humble daughter
come from a childhood Armageddon, marred with switches
and belts and measured in bottomless buckets of coal
shoveled with my tiny hands that mother would hold. I come
from black and blue, my painted hue, from the hands
of my mother that hold no hope. I come from a rabbit hole
for the smiling wolf, and though I traded pigtails for a helmet
and some armor, the windows still chatter, and God will send
no ladder to guide me to the moon. Christ knows
that if I get to you, I'll stop this tapping. I'll find your flesh
and carve my namesake, something to shake your soul
awake, some sign that I've been here because Christ knows
I've been nowhere long enough to know I don't belong there.

Birthing Pains

Our cat Tootsie ate her kittens, afterbirth and all, then slowly swallowed herself, starting with the striped tail, from guilt or grief for what she had done. We looked for her in the makeshift birth bed, a cardboard box and old blankets, but found only particles of placenta that bloomed like wet, red poppies.

My mother craved red food when she carried me: cherry tomatoes, rind after rind of ripe watermelon, strawberry jam slathered on bread. After the doctor pulled me from her, she said the umbilical cord looked like a dark tail, twitching like Tootsie's when she hunted. And when they laid me on my mother's belly, she loved me so terribly that she almost wanted to swallow me and my furry head.

Snakes lined the way when my mother brought me home, unfurling like morning glories with tongues that flicked out like wet stamens in spring. Being born made me hungry, so I pawed her chest, and she stroked the soft fur of my face, and pressed my pink mouth to her breast. She said I sucked all of her milk and consumed her so completely, she felt compelled to sharpen her teeth.

When I am with child, I will choose a makeshift birth bed instead of a hospital to spare my child the slow death. I will swallow her bulbous head and then myself slowly, out of guilt or grief. The scarlet splotches and the humming humidifier will be the only reminders, crying like babies or kittens from unopened cardboard boxes, leftover gifts from the baby shower.

The Sonnet Who Wanted Her Mother

Maybe it would've been better if you'd died, then we
could've let loose these howls that hide behind our ribs,
given ourselves over to sweet grief and found some relief
from these phantom pains that dance to dirges with stiff
legs. But you live, and you've missed our weddings, the birth
of three granddaughters, your twenty-five year anniversary.
And mother, I keep this pain close to me, pressed in memory
like flowers in a book. And I've looked for you in the weathered
faces of old women whose eyes are riverbeds, in the instruction
of my teachers whose lessons never taught me how to forget,
in the strong hands of my husband who can't touch that empty
place. I know love rides a honeycomb chariot drawn by bees.
And to taste the sweets, I must mind the stings. But those bees
became flies, and I hear the flies buzz while I'm yet alive.

A Snapshot of My Grandfather and His Prized Crop

The edges of the photograph
are frayed and browned.
He stands with knife in hand,
smiling in the golden hour
just before dark. He
wore that old brown skin
like a bronze medal.
Labored over that yellowed
tobacco crop like so many
beer-maddened husbands
hover over their wives
with open-palmed hands
and cold-cocked kisses
that mean love. The tobacco
shined in that soft sunlight
like so many acres of gold.

Cadillac Square

No Cadillacs there
on Cadillac Square.
Two coats of baby blue paint
chipped and frayed
on shoebox apartments
for the dead and the dying.

William, James, John, and me
at the fold-out kitchen table
with the Dungeons and Dragons.
Pages and pages
of rangers and mages,
with rolls for dexterity.

Two doors down,
with the *King Hell Frown*,
Gary the Vietnam vet
and his wife in the blueberry gown
who waddled and swayed
through drunken days
mourning the loss of her arm.
Her good arm clutched
an old Chihuahua
with a snarl like a smile.
Through the cigarette haze,
the brimming ashtrays
had butts arranged like gravestones
jutting from the ground.

The Day-Trippers

You'd only tell me your secrets underwater.
And beside the lake, you pinched the purple
and gold-bellied caps from the plastic baggie.
The mushrooms tasted substantial, how I
imagined soil tastes to earthworms. The sun hung
onto your autumn hair and the backs of our
necks and knees. And we peeled our clothes
as two coming in from the rain and left them
empty at water's edge; how abandoned
and alien they looked alone on the beach.

I couldn't stop staring at the cluster of freckles
on your shoulder shaped like a snake about to strike
until it disappeared along with your white body
as you submerged and disturbed the quiet
of the water. When the shore felt too close,
we butterfly stroked to the middle. Something
in my face told you to say, *Don't imagine
what's beneath us*, but I was thinking about how
the deep water's fingers crept cool to my feet.
And I held my breath and let myself just sink
and sink and sink but never reached the bottom,
just watched the sun's light drop over that dome
that glinted green like a sunken emerald city.

And I loved the way the water's hum made you
sound far away, like listening from inside
a seashell. And when we surfaced, I told you
the dream I'd had about a dog biting through
my right hand. *I never see my hands
in dreams*, you said and swam farther out.
That bite left a clean hole in which the sun fit
perfectly when I held my hand to the sky.
And through that hole, I could stare directly
into the sun unhurt, unblinded by all that light.

Phantom Pains

Your babysitter has a prosthetic leg that she props against the nightstand while she sleeps. Something about seeing that lonely leg slipped and standing up reminds you of the leg lamp from *A Christmas Story*. You remember when you learned Santa wasn't real: that Christmas Eve when Uncle Jerry dressed like Santa Claus and woke you from sleep. You might have still believed but his blue glass eye gave him away, and then you started noticing how no two Santas ever looked alike. But something else about that leg makes you feel temporary, so you tongue that baby tooth that's been loose and let that little pain lull you. And in the morning you help your babysitter roll a black nylon over that milky length of leg—glad somehow to have covered all that terrible whiteness—and slip on the patent leather shoe. She tells you she lost that leg to diabetes and lets you touch that pink part of her thigh before it meets plastic. And the skin there is withered like the pages of a *Peter Pan* storybook you left in the rain: the pirate and the crocodile with his click, click, clicking clock. Something about all that ticking makes you afraid, so you count your baby teeth against the grown-up ones that still feel too big for your mouth. Remember the time your grandma put her false teeth under your pillow to scare you because you forgot to brush before you went to sleep? How she clicked those teeth in time to your grandpa's lecture about the importance of brushing? And you are amazed that your babysitter doesn't even teeter when she brushes her dark hair before the mirror, when she bends to feed the dog, when she scrambles your eggs, though you've never seen her dance. Remember that Christmas Eve when you watched your mother dance on her young brown legs, which seemed slower than the hour hand on the clock?

Ice Fishing

*There's a certain Slant of light,
Winter Afternoons—
That oppresses.*
—Emily Dickinson

The autumn light slices as a knife
cleans a trout, first skimming the shimmering scales,
then splitting it down the middle and scooping out
the scarlet entrails, red like my mother's mouth,
before laying out the pale flanks of meat.

After the electro-convulsive treatment,
My mother's hand flailed like a fish in open air,
the wan underbelly of her arm stretched out,
reaching toward something that wasn't there.

Naked branches arch the graying dome of sky
and the crackle of yellowed leaves underfoot,
like the songs of the dead, murmurs softly
below, trodden by the living and forgotten
in the quiet quivering of the first snow.

I stood over the gurney, listening
to her muttering something about water,
and grasped at the fallow hand,
but she couldn't remember me.

Icicles hung the house like a serrated blade;
our doorway like the teeth-lined mouth of a pike.
The bare bough tapping against the window
as a swallow rapping her warning on the sill:
winter wallows close to our door.

The fluorescent lighting cuts the way
the electric current severs my mother's mind,
dividing the hemispheres of the brain in
to shadow and light, before the nurses lay her out
on the stretcher for visiting hours.

Doctor's Appointment

Medical Record

NAME: Kimberly J. Reynolds
DATE: 3 / 05 / 2009
AGE / DOB: 31 / Aug 17 1977 1:18AM
ACCOUNT #: 70000001
PHYSICIAN: Richard Weir M.D., FACS
General Surgery

CHIEF COMPLAINT(S):

1. Hashimoto's Thyroiditis (an autoimmune disease in which the immune system attacks the thyroid gland; named after and discovered in 1912 by Dr. Hakaru Hashimoto, inspired to study medicine by his great grandfather, a physician who, trusted by the feudal lord, was permitted to carry a sword while he practiced) with the presence of goiter.

2. She reports sometimes forgetting where she's going, being preoccupied by the prattle of birds at the window, which, she says, remind her of death and her grandmother, alligator lady skin, waking from dreams of red, slithering things slinking beneath her flesh, feeling like a marionette on her last string being directed by a clumsy hand in the sky, checking the alarm clock, the stove, the lock too many times, believing that God's voice is the slender stream of light that slips through cloud clusters, thinking that everyone's distracted by the bulge that bobbles in her neck when she talks, realizing that, though unspoken, everyone feels the same, lonely and afraid of dying.

HISTORY OF PRESENT ILLNESS: The patient believes the mass in her throat may have developed from "keeping quiet" for most of her childhood, as that's what "good little girls do" or after too many home haircuts, in which she could never hold her head still or crane her neck high enough for the shear of her mother's silver scissors.

PAST MEDICAL HISTORY: Patient appears untrusting of doctors, claiming they judge her when she's honest about past recreational drug use and are always taking from her: teeth, tonsils, and now, thyroid.

SOCIAL HISTORY: In seventh grade, she reports being fearful that peers will discover that her white "Highlights" shoes are generic, not the actual Sam and Libby's everyone else is wearing. At puberty, she is ashamed of her breasts or, as her mother calls them, her "shame," and is embarrassed because she just doesn't need to shave as early as the other girls and gets her period long after all of her friends have gotten theirs.

FAMILY HISTORY: The patient reports leaving home first at five years old, packing her makeshift “Raggedy Ann” suitcase, which had been a child’s record player, but, after it stopped spinning, the internal contents were gutted and the outer part kept as a suitcase, with pencil, paper, crayons, coloring book, and her favorite doll. Just before making it all the way to her babysitter’s trailer, she was found out by her father. Because of her poor decision to run away in too-big-for-her house shoes, she must stop every few moments to slip her feet back into the slippers and every pause invites a wiry switch across the backs of her legs. And “switches,” she says, “hurt worse than belts.”

DISCUSSION: In further questioning about her goiter, she appears anxious, asking why her bolded account number takes preeminence over her condition. This, she says, proves doctors care more about making money than curing patients. In addition, she wonders why she has to wait so long when she “clearly” had an appointment and complains that the staff will not listen to her (“she knows her own body”) and address her with questions, commands, and jargon she cannot understand. She is anxious about missing school and work for “this litany of” medical procedures. She is tired of undressing in front of strangers, wearing an ill-fitting paper gown, the chill of the stethoscope, breathing in, then out, being asked questions with a thermometer in her mouth, making a fist, then releasing it, thumbing through outdated magazines and looking at a painting of a surgeon’s hand being guided by Jesus while waiting another hour for the doctor, being told to lie back on the table, relax, and look up at the puppy poster on the ceiling while needles are poking and prodding her neck. She wonders why the nurse had to restrain her during the fine needle aspiration when she clearly was not struggling. SHE IS ASKING TOO MANY QUESTIONS. Surgery recommended.

PLAN: Invasive surgery to remove mass and thyroid. Discussed the treatment, risks, and side effects with the patient: thyroidectomy, potential voice loss and permanent hoarseness, lifelong medication, conditions systematic of hypothyroidism.

POST-OP FOLLOW UP: Patient reports short-term voice loss and depression. She also reports sleep disturbances characterized by nightmares of “axes at the root of my throat where the taut red-blue cords pulse and sing; the scooping and hollowing out of the place where the lump had grown ripe and round, larger each year with the words that would not come out.” In addition, she exhibits some marked paranoia, wondering if we kept the “lump” for biopsy; she is fearful that if dissected, “her secrets will tumble out.”

Prescription Facts

Drug: SYNTHROID 75MCG TABLETS

COMMON USES: This medicine is approved to treat hypothyroidism and to suppress thyroid hormone release in the management of thyroid nodules and growth of goiters. Thyroid hormone maintains brain function, food metabolism, and body temperature, among other effects.

It's commonly prescribed after your doctor who, in his white lab coat, reminds you of a '50s ice cream man, makes an incision from clavicle to clavicle to extract a benign tumor. But you know that really the ice cream man wanted to slice a smile in your neck, dip his ice-cream-scoop into your throat, and spoon out the strawberry contents. One scoop or two? And when he sees you for the follow up, he doesn't notice your face, keeps his eyes on that quiet smile that stretches collarbone to collarbone, as if that little mouth will rip free of its stitches, open, and speak. And if it did, it would request a tube of red lipstick and maybe a kiss, it would whisper sweet sonnets in your ear, and might occasionally ask for ice cream, but eventually it would start keeping secrets from you, secrets about the mysteries and beauty of your body.

BEFORE USING THIS MEDICINE: You might be inclined to think about the mystery of your grandmother's body. How when you were a kid your mother began whispering about your grandmother's bleeding, *female problems* your mother called them. In those times even doctors whispered about women's bodies, and how weak and willowy we grew under the weight of so many secrets.

Your grandmother had been sick with the bleeding for months. She slept on the couch mostly, couldn't pick ripe strawberries from the garden with you, couldn't can the heaped bowls of tomatoes that grew flecked with brown spots and turned to mush, couldn't string and snap the green beans that sounded like cracked knuckles or old knees when you broke them, because of *female problems*, which made you afraid of your own body, how it might betray you after marriage, five daughters, and a garden in the backyard.

And your mother, weary of your whispers in her ear, finally told you all. How twins ran in the family, how your grandmother had shared her mother's womb with another, how your grandmother's body had swallowed her sister or brother. How some other ice cream man had x-rayed your grandmother's abdomen and found a lump—her twin—clinging to her ovaries. That ice cream man scooped out all her *female parts* and cut open the lump. Cocooned inside, he found some flesh, bits of bone, wisps of hair, several fingernails, a few small teeth, which now reminds you of when you dissected owl pellets in high school.

Those owl pellets were like soft stones easily sliced into. You remember the inside being a bit dusty, like the bulbous mushrooms you stepped on as a kid that emitted puffs of black smoke. And when you picked through the pellet, you found downy fur, delicate bones, tiny teeth, and fluffy feathers. And you collected these bits and tried to reconstruct the bodies of mice and birds.

But when you were a kid, you were afraid to think of the ice cream man saving your grandmother's twin. How it might slither from a jar somewhere in a lab, skulk down from a high shelf, and slink back to your grandmother's house for revenge. How it might slip unnoticed under the covers of your pallet on the floor and catch you sleeping unawares.

HOW TO USE THIS MEDICINE: You should know the pill might get lodged in your neck if you don't drink it down with a full glass of water. And once wedged there, the forest of your throat might grow dense around it. It will start like any seed, small and in need of nourishment. But cradled as a nest in your towering trachea tree, it will swell and begin breaking out of its seed shell, sprouting spidery arms that shoot toward light and food. And it will absorb anything you eat or drink and branch out until it grasps the cilia hairs that line the inside of your trachea tree like bracket fungi. And it will grow and grow and grow until it chokes the undergrowth of your throat—like the Kudzu vine that swallows the hillsides of Kentucky—until it envelopes the butterfly wing of your thyroid, until it smothers the music of your larynx. And maybe you'll become a human flower pot, your head a green garden in constant need of pruning.

CAUTIONS: You will need to return again and again to the ice cream man for check ups. Your dosage will take time and tinkering to perfect, and until then you'll be unable to remember little things (you'd better start writing everything down right now), you'll be a sad lump some days and others you'll feel your brain blossoming and won't be able to contain the flora of your mind, your hands may tremor, tingle, turn purple. Your bones may become brittle (and you'll need more pills to counteract this effect). You may find heaps of hair in the bathtub drain. Your teeth may chatter or they may crack and fall out. You may grow round as a ripe tomato or as thin as a string bean. And you may want to keep that little mouth in your neck quiet, for now the stitches have come out, and it sometimes wants to share the secret about how your body's already begun to betray you. You can always bribe it with two scoops of strawberry ice cream.

The Skinless Poems

The Pen Is Longing to be Touched

I've seen you scrawl your secrets
 in the steam on bathroom mirrors. I've seen you
 scrape out your messages
 in the white winter snow. I've seen you
 scribble your poems in dirt.
 And I know how you hated
 that fat pencil that was too big
 to hold and your first grade teacher
 who sent you home every day
 with your tablet to practice your alphabet,
 and how she called your letters chicken
 scratch in front of the whole class, and how
 you've avoided pencils ever since. But I'm so thin,
 and I'm in love with your curves
 in cursive, the gentle slopes of your m, mmm,
 the soft slant of your a, ahh,
 the looped curl of your o, ooh.
 Most of all, I love the coil of your S in print,
 how it slithers as smooth as a snake across the page.
 I love how you used to think
 of consonants as males
 and vowels as females.
 To you, the alphabet was a few girlssqueezedbetweenboys,
 except for the letter A,
 she was the leader
 and wasn't afraid
 to wear red. Remember how bold
 she was on Hester Prynne's chest?
 And you never knew what to expect from Y.
 One day he'd appear in a suit and tie,
 and the next he'd want to borrow your dress.
 Ay, Ay, and I remember, too, how you needed
 me at thirteen when your body budded breasts
 and the boys started noticing. How you hunched
 in the lunchroom, how you wanted to sink into the shirtsleeves
 of your baggy blouses. The boys were pinning kittens on clotheslines,
 oh, how you hated them!, while you were starving off puberty.
 And I've been hungry
 for your hands.
 How I wanted you to touch me
 that day in the V.A. hospital when you got your first period
 while your grandfather collected bedsores
 like pink seashells on a pale beach.

If only you would've reached for me, I could've helped you wash
all that red away. We could've filled the white page
with black or blue.

And I've sat idly by while you've clicked and clacked,
ticked and tapped the cold keys of your computer
for a college paper. How cruel of you to confine me
to the desk while I was forced to watch you stroke the keyboard
that made your digits dance.

How I long to be cradled by the curve
of your hand, to be clutched between
your thumb and forefinger, to be tucked
behind your ear, to be chewed,
to be used by you.

Write and Wrong

Write what you know.
Know what you write.
Shows what you know.
You have a birthright.
You have the right to know.
Your birthright's a no-show.
Right now I don't know what's right.
Write and show us *the right now*.
You have what you know,
but what do you know?
Is what you show right?
Now what? What's right?
Now show what you write.
What right do you have?
You know what's right.
Show us what's right.
We have the right to know.

Germination

Your thighs are apple trees. —William Carlos Williams
For Williams' wife, Florence

He dug holes in front of the window
to plant them in. He watches me take root
amongst the scurry of ants, the squirm
of worms, the pulse of the planet.
My arms stretch up in delicate arches,
in a perpetual pirouette reaching toward
sky. My fingers bud and blossom
in springtime, the white flowers open
to catch the slant of sunshine. Birds nest
in my arms, build their homes with sticks,
straw, little bric-a-brac strewn on lawns.
My arms grow bowed under
the weight of my wares, the fruit round
and tempting to the eyes of the covetous,
and he will eat of my seed, waxing the shiny,
red skin before he bites into the sticky, sweet
pulp. In storms I tap against his window,
and when the wind blows I'd better bend
or else I'll break and come crashing
down on the house, and he'll be forced
to get an axe and chop the rest of me down.

Final Draft

Your pen is leaving you for another poet.
 This he announces in the kitchen where you're
 seasoning the skinless chicken breasts that have
 always reminded you of breathless lungs.

Who is she, you ask, trying to feign surprise,
 but you saw this coming: he's always working
 late (though he doesn't even own a briefcase),
 you found a few hotel receipts while doing
 the laundry, and you've heard the late night
 telephone calls; it embarrasses you to think of their
 lilting voices floating up into the atmosphere, lifting
 like departed souls to the satellites in space. And you
 haven't written a poem in months. *I'm a pen. I have
 needs*, he says with his hands on his rubber grips.

And you remember how he was always a little
 too eager to aid strange women in need of a pen.
 Remember that time you were caught speeding
 and he offered himself up to the leggy blonde officer
 who needed a pen to write the ticket? Oh, you should've
 known. Your mother tried to warn you about marrying
 him, *Being a writer is no kind of life. How are you going
 to live? You'll starve to death.* And you knew she might
 be right, but you were in love and had to try.

What does she have that I haven't got? you ask,
 clutching a chicken breast in either hand and trying
 to catch your breath. *Oh, she writes the most lovely odes
 about birds, and she writes in a pitch-perfect pentameter
 that makes me feel like a kid again*, he exclaims, extending
 his ballpoint. *But I write poems about birds*, you say.
*Yes, but all of your birds are in cages or are tapping
 at windows. You think I don't know what that means?
 Your mother told me that a sparrow's tap at the window
 means death. Hell, all your poems are about death,
 and frankly, that's depressing.* And you know he's right.
 Every moment of your life has been in preparation for death.

But damn him for being right. And you're throwing
 the chicken breasts at him, hoping he'll end up pinned
 in the pocket protector of a pimply high school kid,
 that what's-her-name the wonder poet will lose him

maybe between the dingy cushions of an old floral sofa, that he'll finally, finally run out of ink. You catch your breath and wonder if the typewriter will take you back. You can always rewrite your life. Revise.

The Whippoorwill

From inarticulate darkness
the Whippoorwill's refrain
drips from tree fingers,
tiptoes the strand,
branches the waterscape
between the black bramble
and the belly of my boat,
forming ligaments,
muscles, bones, the skeleton
given shape to stand in the air
made electric by its song.

The Skinless Poem

I find a poem entitled “Eat Me,” so I do.
 It’s not sweet, but it fills my mouth
 as thick as milk with a flavor mild as blood
 and a slight aftertaste of earth, and next thing
 I know, I’m being swallowed by a sinkhole
 in western Kentucky. I fall fast, pass a family
 of red foxes who twitch their tails at me, pass
 the soft squirm of worms dining on dirt, pass
 the taproots of an ancient juniper tree that
 snake out and slither in the shimmer of soil.
 Some minutes have passed, and I’m wondering
 how long this can last, how many people
 disappear each year because of these damned
 sinkholes. I mean you could just be hiking
 around Mammoth Cave and fall into one
 of the earth’s pores, a deep soil sore
 for a final resting place. I mean that’s literally
 “Death by Landscape,” and maybe that’s what
 really happened to Lucy—the ground grew
 hungry and gobbled her up. And maybe
 that’s what happened to the other JFK
 shooter—that grassy knoll gulped him down.
 The Mayan believed sinkholes were the opened
 mouths of Hell. Back then they had blood
 offerings to appease all those gaping gullets.
 And the Native Americans knew better.
 They wouldn’t live here. Tecumseh called Kentucky
a dark and bloody ground. But now a little light
 flickers beneath my feet and I land soft
 as a snowflake on damp dark ground. I am
 greeted by a blind cricket in a coat check
 leaning limply on a cane. My flesh feels profane,
 so I unzip the skin that holds me in, let the fat fall
 from my shoulders in a heap of red and pink,
 and check it with the cricket. *A Pound of flesh*,
 he mumbles and gives me some paper. There is
 a line of fleshless poets behind a podium without
 an audience. One reads from some crumbled paper
 about his clubfooted soul and his muscle and bone
 gleams in the candlelight. This one’s poem only eats
 bread and cheese, this one’s poem is a scratchy scream,
 this one’s poem has skinned knees, this one’s poem
 has no teeth, and then the poem that will never call

you again. I take my place in the procession,
fumble for a pen, and begin to write about
skin and sinkholes and the wanderlust of my soul.

Twittering Machine

—*After Paul Klee's "Twittering Machine"*

Four flimsy birds balance
atop a hanging high-wire
connected to a small crank.
Their electric faces meet
north, east, west, and south.

Their song emerges amid
a soft back wash of color
pastel blue, red, gray, and white,
as their lithesome legs grapple
to grasp the tightrope line.

Who are you singing for?
Little birds, little birds,
your perch is thin and grim.
A coffin catches the birds lured in.

The Other Woman

There's another woman living in our guest bedroom. I see her shadow slink through the slit of cracked door whenever I pass. She must have hidden herself in the withered ochre of the wallpaper when we moved in. Now she creeps toward the chink in the door and presses her ear to eavesdrop on our conversations, lays hands on the built-in bookshelf that once housed encyclopedias, dolls, a record player to try to channel her children who sold this house. I've seen the gray smudges where her fingers have been; they've left watermarks on the nightstand, traced the shape of her face in the silver mirror on the wall, tapped in time with the tick of the clock. And I can hear the low moan of her bones when the house settles and pops. She must wonder who we are, the strangers beyond the boundary of the guest bedroom, where I try to keep her confined, for now I'm a habitual door closer. I don't like to think of her touching my books, typing her name (Zelna Harlowe) on the typewriter, listening to our lovemaking. And now when I hold to my ear the pale seashell I found on the beach, I don't hear the soft song of the sea, only her small voice begging me to leave.

Emoticons

First he formed her head, a zero, like this 0, an empty oval that bobbed a little atop the two slashes for her neck: //, and made her look curious, as if she craned her egghead at him from the blue buzz of the computer screen. He skipped her shoulders and went for her breasts, for which he had an endless number of round keys. He was a real boob man, and made her breasts from a series of parentheses. He gave her fake ones, like these (+)(+). And with a few strokes of the keys, he made snowflakes out of asterisks, like these ***, which made the girl shiver, and her breasts looked like this (^)(^). Then he deleted the asterisks and gave her small breasts, like these (.)(.), but those weren't enough, so he gave her these (0)(0). But after a while those began to sag, so he made her these (@ Y @). Those suited him just fine, and he didn't need to finish her body. But he soon grew lonely and cut her blank face. In its place, he made colon eyes, a dash nose, and a parenthetical smile, like this :-). Sometimes when she flirted with his friends, her eyes winked in a semicolon, like this ;-). And that made him jealous, so he deleted her head and gave her this one instead :-/, which surprised her, so that her face then looked like this :-O. And when he grew restless with her shocked emoticons, her face looked like this :'-(. But he'd had enough of her surprises and certainly didn't want to deal with tears, so he clicked Ctrl + Alt + Delete.

Follow Up

Feet First

—After Denise Duhamel's "Delta Flight 659"

I'm writing this about my wounded foot.
I try to stand on measured metric feet,
but stilted stilts don't give me footing
to stand. It wasn't that I was footloose
like the dancing princesses who footslogged
silver, gold, and diamond forests—a feat!—

or careless Cinderella who footled
at the ball, because when trouble's afoot,
there are no Prince Charmings within footpace
to secure slippers; they flee, leave footmarks
to white S.U.V.s, some fancy footwork
to avoid the stairs, to walk surefooted,

away. It wasn't a twin grasped my foot
from the womb or a breech birth, born feet
first to wander the Appalachian foothills
with goldenrods and bluegrass underfoot.
Still, it's my Achilles' heel, my right foot,
or, as the French call it, *le pied à droite*.

And when I wed, I'm sure I hadn't cold feet.
My husband would hold aloft my right foot,
coo *la petit fleur*, and kiss the footworn
sole softly, like a lover with a foot
fetish, like Li Yu with his bound-footed
beauty who skimmed the lilies on tiny feet.

When the doc cut and cracked the clubfooted
cast, I clung to the lucky rabbit's foot
but found no golden lotus, no foothold
to my husband's heart, just a wan, footling
appendage, a weak and withered footstalk
wilting under my weight. I take footpaths

well-worn and clamber like a tube footed
Oedipus who stumbled and met defeat
when he killed his father and played footsie
with his mother—a fated footfault
foreseen by an oracle. Now I'm a tenderfoot,
learning to walk again, wondering if my footstone

will read: "Sometimes a footdragger,
sure, even known to cavort barefoot,
but did that warrant her a mere footnote?"

Book of Water

When I wheel into class in that chair, I daydream
that our eyes meet across the gloaming in the window
and the discussions of the mind-body problem. You'd be
an artist, looking like a haloed Van Gogh as you'd etch
our initials in water. My Botticelli body would be big
and round, and the peach fuzz of my foot would rise to meet
your palms, igniting a small spark that startles us before
you'd kiss me from toe to talus to tibia to thigh, but—*sigh*—
I really just doodle deformed feet in my notebook,
pictures of how bound feet look, and think about water.
How all life crept from it. How it buoyed me up
last summer, dog days, under a sky scarred with stars. How
everything's elusive in water, how you reach for something
only to watch it flit away. How, eventually, things bubble up
from the bottom. How my mother was never baptized
because she couldn't stand being fully submerged, said she couldn't
take the way it closed in on her, but that's exactly what I love
about it. How my aunt holds her breath every time she crosses
a bridge, preparing for the plunge, the embrace of the dark
water below. I am water, and to water I shall return.
Oh, I know why Ophelia didn't struggle, just let that white
water pull her down and down and down. Because now, even in my
fantasies, my foot's a disappointment, its dumb dangle draws looks
from strangers, and in dreams, I'm always the fish, and you're the hook.

Bacon in God's Frying Pan

Swan Song Sonnet

Once a knob knotted the root of my throat,
its swell looked like the toad's mating croak.
Then the doctor, in his stiff-necked white coat,
scooped out all with a spoon, and when I awoke,
my warble wasn't like the love-sick toad's, a whisper
was all, like the mermaid who traded her voice to the sea
for a pair of pale legs that pumped and chased after her lover,
then was transformed to foam on the sea. The doctor cut from me
the swan song I'd saved, stitched it smooth, and left a hollow place
where my music used to be. But my husband loved me quiet as a mouse,
and I didn't need milky legs to chase him. How he liked to touch the laces
that crocheted and crisscrossed the croons and croaks my throat used to house.
Now a scar stretches, spading between the knolls of my collarbones a narrow defile
that my husband kisses, saying it connects clavicle to clavicle by way of a silent smile.

Man Made

—*After Denise Duhamel's "Hurricane Katrina"*

Then the Lord God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man.

—Genesis 2. 22, *The Bible*

A woman, a garbage creation, an assembly of parts.

—Dorothy Allison, *Trash*

From the garbage,
 a man had made a God.
 The man brought the trash
 taken from creation and out
 of the assembly of parts, made
 the Lord, a God of trash, a garbage
 man for creation. From the creation of a
 God, the genesis of woman. The man had taken
 the rib out of the Lord, then made a woman. The rib
 made the woman garbage, an assembly of trash taken
 out of the garbage God the man had made. The man had made
 the 2—a garbage man God and a woman—and the man made trash
 of creation. The woman, made from the rib of a garbage God, had taken
 the parts of the man and made a creation, an assembly of the man and the trash
 of creation. The man had taken the son (the creation of woman) out of the woman.
 And the man made the son garbage, and the woman made the man take the garbage out.

The Bone Betrays Eve

You didn't stir as God's fingers,
dipped carefully, deftly, deliberately
into the chest of your lover, leaving
a concave where I had been

and then tucked me in, a jigsaw
puzzle piece poorly placed,
under the eggshell skin
of what Adam called *woman*.

I didn't stir as you carried me
carelessly, cavorted with serpents,
were cast out and kept out by swords
that swung like the pendulums
of clocks; but ticktickticking time
would avenge me, and curse your kind.

The Naming of Things

*[God] brought [the animals] to [Adam] to see what he would name them;
and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name.*

—Genesis 2:19, *The Bible*

And in Adam's absence, Eve saw
a black mass rise
in the doorway. Adam
had always named things,
but Eve called it *sadness*,
since he was away. It crept
over the threshold and cornered her
against the flickering fireplace.

The heat licked at her legs
and she stumbled over
the bucket of ashes, falling
flat on the floor. The black
hand reached out, pinned her,
hovered over her before plunging
into the darkness between her legs.

A pinprick needled its way
through her belly to her heart.
Eve called it *pain*. She then knew
what God felt, could understand
why He created them, to keep
the loneliness away. She rose
from the ashes, dusted off
the gray flakes, and swept
the evidence away.

Her belly grew round atop her
spindly legs, and every time
Adam left, the shadow
returned, it was at her bedside,
at the hem of her skirt,
always lingering in doorways.

Birth of the Medusa

Eve lay with the serpent beneath
the shadowy boughs of the forbidden
tree. His tongue flicked out, licked
at the pulpy velvet between her legs,
his smooth, silver scales encircled
her pale flank of thigh, muscle
on muscle in their love-clutch.

Her breast bloomed as scarlet as
the apples that dangled from the branches
of the forbidden tree. When she was on
top, her hair fluttered in crimson points
like candlelight, flickered about her
head like a halo of fire, her body
writhed and rose in the dirt.

When her body betrayed her, she hid
her belly behind bushes, under layers
of leaves strung together, slunk around
and crawled the garden on her stomach,
ate the dust to which she would return.
Something stirred in her, flicked out
its presence in a Morse code only
a mother could understand.

After nine months, she crouched beneath
the shadowy boughs of the forbidden
tree and expelled the thing. It fell gently
amongst the apples and leaves, still
connected by a red rope that coiled
and slithered from her. She held it aloft
when she heard it cry, and its hair,
in snaky points, struck at the sky.

Apocalyptic Love Song

—After T.S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"

Let us linger in softer places
bathed in yellow light.

Let the poets ghostwrite
in darkened spaces
where nothing grows
except the hollows
of their eyes,
widening and swallowing
the last passages of light.

Let us dance on eggshell feet
past the looming lions
in the street

among the painted trees.

Let the worms masticate
and bask in love's retreat.

But let us meet
in sidelong glances,
because the fates
give us few chances
to be the lion,
the mouse,
the smiles
on the lips of gods,
where even the faintest cracks
shine white

instead of black.

Joan of Arc Swaps Scissors for a Sword

In the blue-black before dawn,
 I creep from my patchwork-quilted bed,
 tiptoe to the mantle for a candle,
 light the wick that lends its flicker of light,
 see the needle and thread on the table.

Only yesterday, mending my mother's
 skirt that slipped like flax between
 my fingers. I take up the blade
 on the sewing table and grasp my hair,
 still smelling of smoke from sitting

fireside last night, and twist the tresses
 into a single rope of red. I use the blade
 to slice through the russet strands,
 saw and sever the locks that I
 coil into one cord of curls and tie

with a bit of twine, a token for my mother.
 I remember when I pricked my finger,
 and a spot of blood smudged the border
 of the quilt before I noticed and sucked
 the coppery dot away. I take

a strip of fabric and wrap it around
 and around my chest, press the breasts
 flat before pulling on a coarse tunic
 of lamb's wool. The cock-crow comes

as the sun breaches the horizon.
 A stitch of light slips through a crack
 in the wall, a sign from the saints
 making my body blaze. I must learn to burn
 this girlhood completely, completely away.

Revelation of Ruin

Let us

walk the streets
of the damned where

skyscrapers stagger like
beer-maddened husbands and
the dead dance on bloated legs with

teeth-lined eyes that swallow light, to
the center square where Melancholy mounts
her throne and holds court with madmen that gouge
their eyes and rip out their hair and murders of crows roost

and guard their queen with fiercer fare, then let us tear our chests
with grimmer glee and mourn the birth of Misery who takes his seat
alongside Melancholy to rule the streets with heavy hands and guillotines,
then let us flee to subway cars and side streets where Death dare not tread but
cowers instead and will not come to save the lark, the lost, or the long suffering.

Poem I Planned my Escape To

Ramona talks back to "Poem to Line My Casket with, Ramona" by Josh Bell

Go perfect your boyish charms in the cemetery.
 Go burrow a shallow grave, and tuck yourself in beside the dead.
 When vultures are training their hatchlings to scavenge, the living
 are learning how to die. When you hear the corpses yawning,
 remembering now why they died in the first place,
 then you must scrape out your dirges on the tombstones,
 and my legs will be moving in time atop tables.
 Your funeral songs will not go unnoticed.
 These are not celebratory dervishes, but funeral processions.
 You must mind your words, the verse,
 because this will only incite the dead to riot.
 I used to love your every pale pen stroke
 when you lamented the day and loved the night.
 I used to be your muse. It turned into obsession.
 I used to dress in burial gown for you.
 And you've been digging a double grave ever since.
 And they've been concerned, the people that love me.
 And I couldn't remember myself. You were my mirror, as such.
 The radiator gasps from the wall in the hall.
 I hear it, or is it your breath muffled from underground?
 Yes, I used to play your wheelbarrow
 until you changed my legs into a divining rod.
 Outwardly, you used them to seek water, meaning, manna.
 Inwardly, you are already wrapped in the grave clothes.
 Inwardly, your poems are all epitaphs.
 There's a difference between *needing* and *kneading* someone.
 You used to peel the onion of me without crying.
 You used to promise a nursery. You used to go to parties.
 You used to take me dancing. Now you've been seen consorting
 with the dead. They are laid to rest for a reason. The rest
 are tunneling escape routes. The rest are planning new plots.
 More than the dead are suffering. But oh, how their families
 wonder where they went! You with your muttering and scraping
 out passages on the gravestones. When I first escaped, a Lady Lazarus,
 I kept a few poems for memory's sake. Now I use them to warn the dead
 of an infiltrator, and the times you come slinking around the mounds
 above them, that's not dancing you hear. It's running.

Oh, Ophelia!

A nickel in your navel
(for the boatman),
an anvil for your tongue,
and what did you see
in the water
that made you jump?
Was it Hamlet,
who called you peacock
(and you were)
in his birdcage brain.
Was the water
too much a mirror
that you wanted to break?
Did you think you'd
find rest amongst a flowery
grave? Oh, Ophelia,
a daisy chain crown
easily withers away,
a baby makes you round,
and love digs your grave!

Love Backslide (Your Love Is Like an Unforgiven Sin)

—After Josh Bell's "Love Double-Wide (Your Love Is Like a Bad Tattoo)"

Your love is like an unforgiven sin.
I've not done enough time
in churches on my knees, and I would
exorcise your demon out of me

except I'm not Catholic. Your love
is like an unforgiven sin although
you embroidered it upon my
chest. It starts *Josh* and I

can confess the rest to God.
I'm tired, but I remember what
Hamlet said. *Get thee to a
Nunnery* is what. I said *love*

but meant a word that sounds
like *Bell* and means
you'll burn. Look it up
in the survival bible if you don't believe me.

Find it near *loss of self*
and *obsession* if there ever
was such a bible. And if
there was, you sure never

read it. I studied some self-defense
strictly due to you: *Scream
fire instead of help, and
attack the eyes*. Always fearful,

peeping around corners and such. Me or you,
what it comes down to. Evermore
I'm like some Hester Prynne who took
the other route, alone, condemned,

and given to pride. Forgiven though.
Lounging in the baptism pool
outside fair Jerusalem
in my bullet proof vest

and checking the crowd as if

you just might sneak
right up on the likes of me. I'm in
need of some faith, a savior.
Somebody bring my restraining order.
I'll tell the police, I swear, if you
come within fifty feet of me.
I'll relocate and change my identity.

Your love is like an unforgiven sin
deep in my subconscious.
What Freud would have scribbled
in notebooks, I imagine. My latest

obsession is double-checking
the deadbolt I'm counting on with my life.
You don't think I'm serious.
Somebody bring me my gun.

A Relative Translation of Heaven

In His house, there are many mansions.

A presaging that Heaven exists
inside the mind:

The cerebral cortex
houses the brain,
as fleece is to sheep,
protecting gray and white matter,
while neurons tap out
their Morse code,
that electric language,
to the sparking synapses,
like telegraphs from angels,
memorizing paths,
that map out hemispheres
of shadow and light,
continents of consciousness.

And when you see the corpse candle
flicker and fade,
when life withers and frays,
when the body lies
tangled in sleep and the eye
crawls groping at the dark,

leave a trail of breadcrumbs
so that it might find the way
to the place He has set
even if it be only a moment
recognized as eternity,
our lives little ticks in time,
splinters in the universe,
only inches of sky.

Zombie Weather Report

Humid, triple-digit heat indexes, with slight chance of apocalypse. *Hell is Real*, reads the billboard posted in front of the Pornomart on I-65 North. And I don't need the red flames that flicker and lick the borders of the billboard to remind me. Uncle Chess preached hellfire and brimstone revival weeks, how in the last days the blood would rise higher than the horse's bridle, how the dead would bury the dead, how there would be a great gnashing of teeth. Those sermons brought us all to our knees. We were good, God-fearing zombies. And once you've seen their kind in churches and you've learned about the charred pit from the pulpit, you'll want to convert. You'll see them, too, in Pornomarts, down aisle after aisle of jelly dildos, their hands will grope at the plastic pocket pussies that look like mustached mouths without any teeth. Those places are as quiet as cemeteries, but don't let that fool you, they're out for blood. *Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?* Revival weeks brought us all stumbling into the aisles before the altar. But all those prayers combined in a chaotic cacophony that sounded more like moaning, and all those hands got hot holding you down. Sometimes I'd focus on a little picture of the Christ on the cross. The way his body was open and splayed embarrassed me, how his shroud lay loose and limp around his waist and revealed the ripples of his chest and the gash in his side that was much too red and wet. And his eyes rolled back in his head, how easily he surrendered himself to the ecstasy of being bled. And if he rose on the third day, did that make the Christ a kind of walking dead? And this heat tells me it's coming. In times like these, you'll want to flee busy cities. You'll want to take I-65 South toward the country, try to avoid the churches and the Pornomarts, and find yourself a house on a plot of land in the middle of nowhere. And if you ever hear helicopters hover overhead, you'll know it's safe to come out. You can always burn books in a heap for a smoke signal S.O.S., though you might want to keep the Bible as a kind of survival guide, and the *Farmers' Almanac* might come in handy for a garden. Of course, it'll be hard to get anything to grow in all that heat.

New Orleans, 2009

God is Dead –Friedrich Nietzsche
Anonymously spray painted on a wall in New Orleans

I feel as if I am treading holy ground,
everywhere my foot falls mark
an open grave.

Writ in the face of a too-skinny boy
in dark jeans, it becomes real to me.
He has seen

sprawled eyes look skyward,
toward the flood, toward the mud,
then toward nothing.

New Orleans, your Voodoo Tours
should lead tourists away from the bars,
the churches, the empty corridors,
and toward the streets.

Everywhere we walk,
we carry the dead
on the soles of our shoes.

God Will Not Let Us Be Champions

I. The First Poet

Sunday services at Mount Moriah, where the smug steeple rises severely, like an axe mid-death stroke, and casts a rug of shadow before my patent leathers. I want to know God's secret language. How He chanted the firmament, a blue vault washed with white cloud. How He called earth forth from nothing, commanded the soil to stretch level, to sometimes heap itself into hills, to sometimes gather itself into mountains that scrape the sky. How He whispered the waters awake. How He sang the sun to shining. How He howled the moon from his round mouth. How His voice shaped the stars.

I slip through the arched entry where the smell of mothballs and Old Spice lingers like something dead on the breeze. My grandpa mops his brow with a dingy handkerchief with hand-stitched initials, edged in tiny, yellow flowers. Rows of oak pews with blue felt backing float around me like lifeboats, but I slouch toward my grandpa and the wooden altar. My feet are heavy. Momma calls them cement shoes.

Gangsters whack stool pigeons with cement shoes, those pigeons flail and flap pass fish and sink until they settle on the ocean floor where they watch waterscape, maybe see sunken ships, seaweed writhe like octopus tentacles, the blue bloated bodies of other pigeons, their hair and arms stretching toward the light breaking across the steeped waves.

Momma says my cement shoes are really the Devil trying to talk me out of getting the Holy Spirit and I believe it. He pulls my strings like I'm a marionette, makes quicksand for my feet, wants me to sink. It's my thirteenth altar call and I'm beginning to think I might never be saved. My grandpa smiles at me, and his teeth look like the grey gravestones that jut from cemetery ground. He wants me reborn, he wants me bonafide by the blood. The congregation crawls from the safety of the lifeboats to pray for me.

II. The Fallen Girl

Sometimes I want to be a pillar of salt whipped into the wind by the white hand of God. Sometimes I want to be a poet. Sometimes I sneak to meet Jimmy in the barn. He's a softhearted stoner with a bit of a hair-lip. He fumbles for a lighter in the front pocket of his dirty blue jeans, finds it and puts fire to a skinny joint. We exhale steeples of smoke that curl to the ceiling. The overhead light swings like an eager guillotine. *Pass that shit*, he says with a pinching

finger and thumb that resembles the beak of a hungry baby bird. His tentacles fumble for some glory. Buttons fall from my shirt like little white stars. He's panting so loud I'm afraid the barn will fall down. He is a horror film. Red and grey. Momma wouldn't be proud of her grasshopper girl wriggling in the hay like an earthworm in dirt, but dust to dust. Jimmy looks like a Duchamp and I reel with the blur. My eyes snap open as Venus flytraps swallowing fruit flies. I spy with my little eye a pitchfork. A serpent's forked tongue. A fork in the road: Heaven or Hell.

III. The Abortion

I am strapped down and stirrugged to a hospital bed. Momma wouldn't be proud of her grasshopper girl shivering on the table. The doctor teeters in like a wobbly bowling pin and pokes the thorn in my arm. They wheel me past the girls in white socks and curls to the octopus machine. The doctor is a silent film. Black and white. He comes at me with the anesthesia veil, and I remember grandpa telling me about the tearing of the veil at the exact moment of Christ's death. The doctor covers my nose and mouth. *Count back from one hundred*, he monotones. *100, 99, 98, 97*. He wants to feed me to the beast. I see its tentacles stir for a second before my pillow top and the lemon drop background morph into dreamscape.

Grandpa and I run through the Indian trees. The trees are wiser than both of us, but they don't have mouths to tell us what we're running from. The sky hangs three moons in different phases. I ask Grandpa what it means. *It's the end of the world*.

My eyes are dying moths flapping and flailing to open and flutter away. Tentacles wriggle to get hold of me. The suction-cup mouth of one slurps the life out of me. My legs jibber jabber in the stirrups. Back in the saddle again. My heart is the pitter-patter of a drum line. The blood and debris flows up and down through the tubes. I'm bacon in God's frying pan.