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FISH FROM DEEP WATER

by

MONICA R. BURCHFIELD

Under the Direction of Dr. Beth Gylys

ABSTRACT

These poems are lyrical narratives dealing primarily with the joys and sufferings of familial relationships in present and past generations, and how one is influenced and haunted by these interactions. There is a particular emphasis placed on the relationship between parent and child. Other poems deal with passion, both in the tangible and spiritual realms. The poems aim to use vivid figurative language to explore complex and sometimes distressing situations and emotions.

INDEX WORDS: Family, Children, Religion, Faith, Love, Suffering, Cuba, Poetry

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by

MONICA R. BURCHFIELD

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2010

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2010

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by

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Office of Graduate Studies

College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

August 2010

DEDICATION

To Cliff, Felicity, and Gabriel, who have given me the impetus and desire to write these songs from my heart.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Beth Gylys, the chair of my thesis committee, for her gentle, perceptive, and wise guidance throughout my entire residence in the poetry program at Georgia State University. She has helped me both envision and then realize a plan to give more accuracy and clarity to my lyrics; Dr. David Bottoms, for all his exuberance with regards to poetry and life as a whole, for his encouragement of my work, and his thorough feedback on my poems throughout my study in the program; and for Dr. Paul Schmidt, who instilled me with a love for Victorian poetry, through his deep understanding and respect for the art and forms of all poetry. I would like to commend Drs. Gylys, Bottom, and Stokesbury for their serious devotion to helping me, and their other students at Georiga State University. I treasure every class and conference I have had.

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INTRODUCTION

Just recently, my father, a physicist and ever curious about my creative inclinations, asked me to define poetry or what constituted a poem, and then, how can one differentiate between degrees of quality, successful poems within a given selection. Essentially, what makes a poem worthy, admirable, and even necessary? I admit I was unprepared for the discussion at the time, and after explaining to my father the contributions from such masters as Whitman, and his poems' emotional impact on generations of readers, I was still unsatisfied with my response to an excellent question that surely deserved more thought. Certainly a good poem is one that has universal and timeless appeal, one that does not rely on popular culture, or strictly on wit and sarcasm for the mere sake of it, but resonates with a reader on a more profound emotional level. Of course, however, there are countless poems written and published that shock a reader with emotion, yet it is readily apparent that an emotional response alone cannot constitute a fine piece of writing.

A good poem, then, requires an emotion and story, yes, but this is nothing if not refined by a sense of meaning and accuracy as derived from a frame for this emotion or story to be illuminated. The structure does not need to be constructed necessarily in a recognizable poetic form, yet techniques such as achieving strong voice, rhythm and musicality, and of course, figurative language, all contribute to the heightening of the experience of a poem, and immediately can give weight, urgency, intellectual worth, and overall meaning.

I explain this for the point of saying that is it through my studies at Georgia State University that my poetry has been able to expand beyond the emotional, into poems that are hopefully layered with multiple and purposeful meanings, as well as the texture of figurative language. It has always been natural for me to write poems that could tend towards the sentimental, as I think the subject matters and themes I am consistently drawn to write about—familial relationship in particular—are ripe with this characteristic. Yet, I have learned from my professors that a poet can, and should, definitely take the risk to write about what could be perceived as sentimental, and that it can even be executed successfully,

provided precautions are taken. One way I have taken this precaution in my own writing is by ensuring the scene I depict is as specific, concrete, and unique as possible, in order for it to become more credible for the reader. A poem I worked especially close with to avoid overt sentimentality, even though the subject matter—my grandmother losing her present and past self to dementia—was in "Whistling Men." There is most certainly a degree of sentimentality surrounding the poem and I accepted this, yet I nevertheless wanted to sidestep being dramatic or trite. Thus, I worked to weave in concrete details—a pencil eraser, slices of an orange, a silk scarf—to create a more vivid and specific scene.

This leads me to comment on the process of revision in poetry, which as an undergraduate creative writing student, I was quite adverse to, feeling naively that my first draft was pure and should remain untouched by any subsequent alterations. Since my studies in the graduate program, however, I learned to quickly put aside this pride and appreciate revising, realizing that poetry is indeed more than just impromptu scribbling from the heart and then transmitted to a writing journal. A poem's lyrics must be revisited and adapted in order to completely flesh out its potential and its beauty. Additionally, as discussed previously, it is imperative for these emotional truths to be embedded in a very carefully placed structure. It is amazing how simply changing several line breaks within a poem gives a different feel to a poem as its rhythm and even tone can be modified by this, which affects the overall meaning of the work.

Perhaps because of my Catholic background, or maybe even my Hispanic heritage, I am consistently drawn to imagery within a poem. I adore poetry that is heavy with surprising imagery, first coming to this realization through reading the Latin American tradition of magical realism in novels, and then later, in poetry. I became obsessed with Federico García Lorca late in my undergraduate college years, pierced by his unique construction of images. One in particular has haunted me from the beginning, in his "Ghazal of the Love Unforeseen"—"No one ever knew you martyred / love's hummingbird between your teeth." I remember being so taken by this. What could it mean? And then, even though I did not quite grasp the idea as a twenty-year-old, how could I still find the words so beautiful and alluring?

This has most certainly been an important poetic goal of mine that I hope is reflected to some degree in the poems catalogued here. That is, that my poems reflect a concrete sensuality and beauty through their use of imagery and figurative language, that the images are surprising to readers, though that their meanings remain clear and pertinent, despite that the comparisons and descriptions might be unexpected. I love the possibilities that language affords, and thus, I give particular care to ensuring my images pervade the majority of the lines, offering tangible detail and color, even and especially when the subject matters themselves may be distressing.

Naturally then, I have enjoyed studying, while at Georgia State University, the poetry of James Wright in particular, as his poems most definitely flirt with sentimentality, if not wade right into it, and his lines are rich with what to me is exquisite imagery. The tenderness, and at the same time, specificity, of the images, tend to wring my heart out thoroughly. Another aspect that I greatly admire with regards to Wright's poetry, and something that I have been able to delve into during several of my poetry workshops in the graduate program, has been the idea of the spiritual world. It is evident that experiences in Wright's poems lead the speaker, and even perhaps the reader's mind, into a spiritual realm.

It remains fascinating to me as a poet to think about where exactly does the poem issue from. I have felt that there is indeed something very mystical or spiritual about writing—that there is a state when a poet is trying to think up a subject to write on, and all he can do is wait and be prepared. Suddenly, and usually unexpectedly, the poet is struck with an image, or phrase or line, and it absolutely consumes him. The poet is prompted by a sense of urgency to sit down and transfer this idea to the page. I am delighted to fantasize that there is some fragile nerve curled somewhere in all of our bodies that functions essentially as a poet's antenna. Perhaps we are all equipped with this sensibility toward perceiving and exploring the world with great care and detail, yet for some reason, we as professed poets are more able to access this part of us, and thus, we are compelled to write, and to keep and tell stories.

It is a beautiful idea that writing poetry is a balance and combination of being a sieve, open and expectant for a communion with the more spiritual side of ourselves and the surrounding world, but yet,

simultaneously, that writing poetry commands intellectual diligence and precision, knowledge of craft, as well as knowledge of the legacy of preceding poets. I have thoroughly benefited from my studies under the professors of the writing workshops. I have been challenged to extend my poetry, in order to find more accurate, clearer, and richer ways to refine my lyrics.

What follows here is a compilation of the poetry I have written while at Georgia State University. They are arranged in three general sections that encompass the major focuses of the work. There is an initial section with poems that are familial in nature, a second smaller section with poems more religious in nature, and then finally, a third section with poems dealing more specifically with love. My hope is that a reader should still be able to witness how all three sections correspond with one another—echoing similar themes, and especially a consistent voice and style of language and imagery. This collection is hopefully representative of the poetic style and voice that has been shook free from me as I came to understand how poetry works and why it is so imperative that it does so. These poems chronicle my transformation into a hopefully more articulate poet than I had been at the beginning of my graduate study of poetry. I have been given the training and tools to identify fine writing, feeling poetry to be both a worthy and necessary way in which to nourish both the human spirit and intellect. Thus, the poems that follow embody my quest to write in such an uplifting way.

Section I

The Year the Fidelistas Fled to the Mountains

When Papá left us he was high on his tank,
insomniac for the people, busy and drunk
opening flasks of electricity, resuscitating
the island crowd, and we were full—
our bellies tight with the sweet nausea of plantains—
and young, still sobbing at bullfights.
For weeks after he left
we rattled dominoes in our pockets,
hoping he would hear and remember:
maracas and slapping palm fronds
in the sand, how we were all hummingbird
for him in the evenings after work.
We searched for his remains
in la espuma del mar, the blue ocean curd
he fed us as infants, but only could find
his black hair, spiraled, stuck to the bathtub,
his smell of silverware in a trunk
lined with green velvet, a bit of sugarcane,
hard like his voice when he scolded us
for touching the baby's penis,
or when we asked him, *¿Papá, qué es reina?*
Left alone with the neighbors
and our mother's unscented votive candles,
we mourned from our beds—waiting for the salt water
of his machismo to splash us again.

Triptych

Left panel
A jar holds
a pearl strand.
The clasp closed
looks like a silverfish—
it can survive
on only one
meal a year.

Center panel
Mama doesn't eat. You don't eat,
Mama, and though mothering to me is still
a baby doll's voice box crackling,
You look pretty in pajamas,
when did you stop eating? I used to think you fed
off father's garlic-smelling cheeks, that you fed
in secret when we were young. You missed your body
you'd tell me, and I spent a day searching
for the china plate breasts you once owned—
in the laundry, in the wells of flowers—
that humbled even a tight-hipped matador.
When you, with your hair black as plums,
or fire, found one white strand there, I shuddered
as you plucked it, wondering if God
would remember to subtract it from his count.

Right panel
How could I worship
your dress of orange gauze
without worshipping you?

Guardian

The night after my father struck my mother
with a glass, shards spraying, framing her head
like the nimbus of a tortured saint,
I snuck into their bedroom, awakened
by the quiet, and saw an angel leaning over
my sleeping father. The angel wore a gown
that swirled with liquid fire—black
and orange melding into braids, into tributaries,
into veins of a leaf—a sword burned in his belt.
I knew my father never rose for Sunday
morning mass, never dipped his fingers
into the font by the front door. But the angel
examined him as I thought a man might
before leaving a woman he loved, or maybe
as an artist would view a damaged canvas.
The angel's hair hung in thick golden twists,
and when he met my eyes, one lock of it fell
in slow motion—it took years for the lock
to drop from ear to shoulder. When it settled,
the fire in the angel's skirt turned to rock.
Only a chisel could release my father now.

Vows

My parents only touched when they fought—
at night and outside, their shadows
spilling the lawn like cloth across a loom.
The four of us, from the windows,
were embarrassed but pleased
as their dark rib cages wove into one another
until they finally merged—
their many arms like a Hindu god
dancing in our front yard.

So when my brother calls
asking if I believe in marriage,
I remind him how the fights would end—
my mother's cheeks yellow in the porch light,
the moths that gathered there whirring
too close to her lips, and my father
leading her back inside with the promise
he'd return with shrimp low mein.
Later, the scrape and clink
of spoons against ice cream dishes
as we listened from our beds,
like wedding guests tired from traveling,
ready for the couple to lean in and kiss.

Erica's Funeral

The day after, my father
took me to the ballet.
With ribs jutting like piano keys,
the girls were birds molting
jade feathers—their tulle skirts
lifting in the air. Their shoulders
pressed behind like wings
when they leapt into men's arms.
Men who held these girls,
narrow as dresser drawers,
over their heads.

When the ballet ended
and my father took my hand
stepping into late afternoon
sun, I saw: hairs on my knees
glinting like copper filaments,
my father lighting a cigarette—
felt a ten-year-old's urge
to reach across and pick
the flame from its stem,
press it between pages
of a heavy book—
and, on the long drive home,
a procession of luminaries
sashaying through the sky.

Leaving Myrick Street

My mother holds my baby over her shoulder.
My mother is small, and wet from crying.
The baby's eyes are lost in the painting behind her—
a field with white and orange flowers, one farmhouse
far away, one mountain even farther.
Delaying the trip ahead, I ask my mother for a story,
and she tells me about a friend whose daughter
is in jail, the daughter's two children in Australia,
the husband now married to their nanny.

I had hoped instead she would have told me
about meeting my father the first time,
a bar at Northwestern, her hair still long,
his physics book open to a colorful atom.
And, the dates after that, coffee
at the Hancock, ninety-five floors up,
my father holding back her green silk shoulders
on the observation deck, both of them leaning over
to pick out the lake from the night.

My baby is fascinated by the small gold medal
at my mother's neck. She pulls it into her mouth.
We smile together at the chain spilling
from her lips, her look like a fish, caught.
I start to make the signs to show I'll be leaving—
the keys, a sigh, picking the crumb from my baby's cheek.

Walking out the door, my mother gives me the baby
and a newspaper clipping about birthstones
and what they mean for your love life.
I cannot meet her eyes. She stays inside the house.
The drapes open to reveal a tableaux—
my mother with a hand across her stomach,
the other cupping the gray hairs at the base of her neck.
I put the baby into the car—
my mother, at the window, does not wave.

Portrait of Abuela

My Abuela, confined to the kitchen table by her disease,
sketches profiles on corners of newspapers and napkins—
telenovela stars' exotic features
reduced to a sharp eyebrow, quick jaw, faucet of hair.
As a girl I was amused how the eyes
looked just like inequality signs in my math book,
and I teased her severe, Egyptian art.

Now, I am terrified of these side views,
of what I might find on the other half—
at best a disproportion, a distracting mole.
But what if there was nothing, only women slipping piecemeal
into quiet resistance to this country, their best parts
left behind in compact mirrors, forever closed into top drawers?

My Abuela, in a photograph taken in Cuba,
meets the camera full on. Her hands are covered with silver rings
that cup her face like a chalice, and I notice for the first time
the wideness of her mouth as she smiles, beckoning
to the man who would become her ex-husband—
unafraid of what the other side might show.

Whistling Men

When my grandmother invited me over for soup,
I expected her broth with floating pearl onions
and mushroom halves. Instead, there was nothing
but a pencil eraser at the bottom of the bowl.

Now, I wish I had picked up my spoon, blown hard,
my breath sloshing over its empty cupped hand,
and swallowed. Like my husband does with our daughter—
taking the plastic orange and peeling wedges into her palm.
Instead, I said I'd already eaten.

For the rest of the visit, she sang a ballad
about a beauty mark next to the lips of a lover.
She told me I should look for a redhead to marry,
a jeweler if possible. She told me when she visited Spain
the local men whistled so fiercely, their fingers turned into salt.

Now, I wish I had held out the bowl
when she brought the second helping.
Applauded for her, the girl leaning over a stone bridge
in a high-waisted skirt, and a scarf in her hair.
Hungry, good-looking men filing behind her.

Visiting Harborchase

We visit my grandmother on Sundays.
My sister, who is eighteen and likes her jeans
pushed below her hips—
the wave of her back beautiful—
keeps her bangs in her eyes.
We can't get by the nurses' station today.
There is a woman in her wheelchair
with two gray streamers of hair, crying.
She is bending over something,
a plastic orange-skinned baby doll
that she pushes to one of her loose breasts—
the one not contained behind the cotton gown.
The skin is stretched thin and violet,
like the pair of newborn squirrels
we found when we were children,
curled and dead, their nest capsized
from a branch to our flowerpot.
We'd been sick to our stomachs
for days. The woman in the wheelchair
hides her face in her elbow when we pass.
My sister pulls down the scrunched elastic of her top,
and we continue through the hallway,
looking for the back of our grandmother's head.

Silver Bead

Aiming for the neighbor's pigeons,
he shot her with a BB gun—
catching her on her bare shoulder
as she sat on top of the metal playground slide
they used as their factory belt. He watched as she flew
down the slide—the way she didn't clutch at her shoulder
but grabbed fistfuls of the dry pine needles,
messing their slow progress, her lips folding into her mouth
like the mollusks they'd seen at the shore. He checked
for the bead, silver, like the kind pressed onto tiered cakes.
And when he saw just a warm red pock left, he coaxed her
to play again—to take up twigs and sticks to ply the dirt,
to search for roots, to find them knotted and far from the house,
to hack at them, to hear the whistle of pressure
before the roots break open into faucets of gold.

Lonely Language

We reveled in the lonely language
of whales as children, calling
out to one another from our beds
in clicks, moans, and trills.
Only, my brother's voice could not
help itself, casting loudly, urgently
into the darkness of a sleeping house.

Even now, he composes: drawn
to Alligator Point and St. Theresa's,
wandering the strands, whistling
to the waves, waiting for his sonar's
rebound off others who might respond
in familiar bellows, and then come
to pull him from his frequent beachings.

Son

After he crashed all three cars,
he took a dish washing job at Cypress, downtown.
Sometimes his mother goes there at happy hour
to hold a glass of Southern Comfort.
Sometimes she tries the specials, breast of duck,
seasonal fruit crisp on white scalloped plates—
hoping he'll appear in the door frame,
his apron spattered with basil and rind,
steam lifting from his hands.

Midnight she arrives to pick him up.
He is leaning on the dumpster
with the sous chef. The headlights of her car
point at him, and he throws his arms out.
Maybe the width of the baking sheet.
The neck of his guitar. The amount of time
he has left before something else inside him
will char and flake to the bottom.
Toxic-black, in need of a wire brush.

Hannah Keeps Busy

You're planting pumpkins next to your driveway
and trying for roses, the kind that will climb forever
up the front of your house. You're busier than ever,
crocheting children's hats and slippers with wide magnolias stitched on.
The shoes have names like Olivia, Finn, the children you can't conceive.
You sterilize a hundred jars to make blueberry jam.
You buy two new bras. You plan your lessons—
the students will kneel on their towels, push wooden stars through holes.
At the deli you order your cheese sliced so thinly
the pale squares catch light like yellow stained glass.
Evenings, you walk to the fountain at the college,
its bottom covered with octagons and coins.
The artist has placed five children in bronze playing there.
They catch each others' wrists through the wall of water.
One of them is shy and looks down at the sunglasses
tucked into her blouse. You remember when you were a girl,
swallowing a penny in private. Your stomach, tiled
with your wishes, like a fountain's floor.

Amber Alert on I-285

Little lime, abscond with me
for I have inscribed you
on the palms of my hands,
your face a beaming book,
an illuminated manuscript,
lapis lazuli grinding
through its veins.

Already, I have felt your sleepy heat
blaze through the wide arches
of my fingernails,
memorized the length
of your body like this:
skinny skinny brown
skinny brown
skinny brown.

Did you know, tiny chokecherry,
that you and I are seers?
That the constellations
of moles down your spine
the day you were born
foretold this moment
of your reign as queen—
I have come from you
and you from me.

Did you know, precious urchin,
that this road will spiral us
to the gates of your kingdom,
away? Away from armies
of wanting wombs,
into my arms, soldering you
to safety, my soul.

Immigrant, refugee, exile,
your tears
must be tired,
let them rest in my palms.
For now, for now.

The Woman with the Hemorrhage

After twelve years of doctors she was greedy to touch him—
to push through the crowd, pull at the hem of his robe.
He flinched when she caught it,
despite the people pressing him, raking his hair,
the cloud of children, thin widows, misshapen limbs.
Even his apostles wondered as he searched for her face.

It happens often—dreams that jostle me awake,
the light from the street spread out like a fan on the carpet,
and I go through the hall and the kitchen, to her crib.
She lies sockless on her stomach, traced by a dye of sweat
on the sheet, her legs tangled in a blanket,
calling to me in a voice as private as an envelope.
Through the crib bars, she sends one hand shooting out into the dark.
How happy he must have felt, with the woman's hands in his hands.

Kitchen Sink

You won't be undressed like this until years from now,
when some other knows you well enough
to move slowly, drawing your arms out of sleeves.

In some cultures it's custom to curse
a lovely child out loud to keep the gods turned
into their hand mirrors. I cannot help myself.
Lately, I sigh into your neck.
Your eyelashes cluster like women, wet and dark and thick.

What will you think when you find the photograph,
and see yourself, a baby wound in a towel
with a hood, like an animal caught in a snowstorm—
and a woman clutching this scoop? You will not think
Madonna and Child, the one where he leaps
from her lap and she lets him.

You might think of the tide, rushing terrified
to recapture what it thought it could give up.
You might think of a girl at a picnic bent over
an egg on a spoon, flat-footed and careful.
Or, a lover's body by candlelight.
That shaded but memorized nest.

At the Duck Pond

I can't look away from the mallard's face,
the weave of saturated emerald and sapphire feathers.
He’s swimming next to a larger duck
whose body—I lean over the railing—is not dingy,
but impeccably white like in story books.
All she is missing is a shawl printed with tea roses.
In the shallow, dry leaves the size of men's feet,
and a tongue depressor, nudge
both ducks' breasts, but they don't seem to mind.

When I hear the wet shake-out of wings behind me,
I turn and see my daughter running straight
into a huddle of geese. They part for her
with their ballerina necks and their coughs and gasps.
My daughter's thin hair fans up from her scalp.
Below, in the water, the two ducks are joined by others—
rusted, homely—who encircle them like chaperones.

Ed Sullivan's Girls

In Chicago dusk she skates on the frozen rink
her father has hosed for the five of them in the yard.
Only she has stayed behind, tired of the singing women on TV—
the foxfire shine of their fingernails, sherbet cheeks,
ankle bones like gold cups. She circles
until the neighborhood men selling almonds from their carts
have all returned to their dark-skinned wives.
She doesn't mind the cat eyes near the fence, or the cold.

In the bedroom later, her sisters will be sleeping,
their drying hair spread like winter branches across the pillows.
She'll crack the window, the long metal cord
from the light bulb above brushing her neck like a tail.
She'll hear the train shrieking by, and across the street—
a beautiful woman stepping from a car,
strings of pearls looped tightly around her neck,
laughing underneath the floodlight.

Operation Pedro Pan, 1961

They all carry something.
The girl seated next to him
has a holy card with Christ pointing
to a gash in His heart, redder than a mango.
His mother has given him a loaf of bread
with the imprint of a palm frond
baked into the crust, like a fossil.

From the airplane's window, he finds her
sealed to the glass pane of the terminal—
her mouth opening and closing.
He remembers yesterday, catching
the silver minnow in his hands, its body
all shuddering muscle, and his mother—
swimming past the waves and the buoys,
sunbathers shouting she'd gone too far.

In America, he'll have roller skates
and a pond where his breadcrumbs
bring fish up from deep water,
fish singed orange like the sweet potatoes
he'll eat. And his letters will be plentiful,
rolled inside Coca-Cola bottles,
an armada of green glass
pushed to her across the ocean.

Section II

The Annunciation

Before she cried *fiat,*
there was a cinematic gasp
as the sleepers of Sheol raised
their faces to the Earth in hope.

From the windless plain,
the clack of their collapsing fans sounding,
their stomachs wringing,
they waited, remembering sunrise.

And the angels, suspended as well,
whispered—confiding their recent pastoral dreams
of fruit erupting from dark places,
linen, palms. Luxuriant themselves,

they wondered if she knew her teenage form
commanded time, if she knew she could steel her body
and angels would grow vain, wanting brooches to rest
on their clavicles, that men would comb the clouds
for winged chariots, anything of gold.

With a deep exhale from the universe,
as flames licked and caressed, singeing her pelvis,
singing a child forth from the shadow,
she said *yes, all right, yes,*
and the people of Sheol reached out for their mother.

Slain in the Spirit at the Steubenville, Ohio Youth Retreat

From the time it took to raise his arms above his head,
to the quick drop to the tarp,
Parker had finally caught the Spirit.
It wasn't that his skin burned translucent
like the surface of a pond in the morning—
golden and rouged, his veins displayed
all knotted and crossed. There wasn't a fire bird
seizing him with its beak,
funneling ancient syllables into his ear.
There was just the feeling that
if he was given a pound of red clay and a wheel,
he could shape something wonderful.

And when the Spirit climbed off him,
beating a burning streak away from the camp site,
toward the field where earlier in the weekend
he had traced the V of the new girl's sweater,
fishing out the part of her necklace
that had settled there, a little treble clef,
Parker worried about the Israelite women—
naked without the ropes of heavy gold
around their ankles, whisking and pouring,
the mold for the calf sloshing over itself,
laughter as their hair shook out like coils of light—
that they hadn't been able to explain themselves.
Opening his eyes, Parker saw the tent's canopy above
as a shirt pocket cleaving him to his spot in the dirt,
and when later, volunteers arrived to collapse it,
the canopy came hurtling down, a red and plastic shard from the sky.

The Modesty and Immodesty of a Fig Leaf

Daddy, I'm in a funk tonight
down here at the Desert Club
where indigo-colored lights

trick me into recounting my bones, bleaching
your name from my forehead, smothering
the pewter beggar of my heart when it opens

its mouth to natter Alleluia to you.
I can't sleep in this heat, so I multiply
winged birds in my head, pay tribute

to your sun, its fire, you in gold armor.
Daddy, I'm feeling risqué—want to shimmy
with my sins, spread apple peels across men's laps.

But do what you do:
wrangle with my ego's hand mirror, canonize
or etherize me—just be gentle, I'm seducible.

Sing tender a cappella and I'll put down
this dirty glass, I'll blow up clouds
of gardenias to you. You who spoke nonsense

to the shepherds, spoiled us with the good wine,
spit like a cowboy, you know
where I keep my porcelain.

Roll back your sleeves, Daddy, and sing to me
my future upside down. Wind up my scarves
and tuck me in before I remember

that touch of olive leaf yarn on my waist,
your cowry shell tears,

your rust-covered sword.

David and Bathsheba

I took you to my bed
and felt what he must have before
Eden's gate soldered shut behind them:
soapstone buried beneath his feet,
and carving it into antelope, waking
beside her the first time to find something better—
hair to put his hands into. Something curved.

But later, in the tree above them,
eyes with irises as dark and large as plums
darted back and forth, and they heard nothing
for months but sand striking itself.

Tomorrow, in broad day, I'm afraid what I'll find.
Neighbors stretched over my wives
in the garden, the impossibly long X
of pale legs, discarded robes
with sleeves tangling and tossing like kites.

What Novitiates Regret

You were Joseph, and I was the pharaoh's wife
with orange groves in my hair and silver bracelets,
like the crusts of moons, around my feet. I came to you
to twist in your palm, unwind and shudder.
I would have pawned my jugular vein to the Gypsy
to drag my thumbs through the earth of your chest,
but you wrapped yourself too tightly in the colored robe.
I entered the convent,

entered the presence of *wailing and grinding of teeth*,
offered your raw braille of kisses on my chin to the Lord,
ripped out clumps of cypress trees from my clay core,
made the one conjugal face you will never see.

I am tempered now. Holy water stains
constellations of honor on my covers. I knit
mountains for the Bridegroom, I reinvent
carbon for the Bridegroom, I rise *to open*
to my lover, with my hands dripping myrrh,

to finger paint revelations. But,
if you had *set me as a seal on your arm*,
before my hair became so silent,
I would be kneeling on tile now,
licking the warm sheet of rain
left behind from your shower,

and would not have this ark of the covenant,
this heavy charm, hanging from my neck
like a soldered hymen.

After the Wedding at Cana

My wife is full off the magician, his trick, the foreign wine—
her hands grip an invisible chalice, her fingers connect
to form a ring which she raises to my mouth, *Did you smell it?*
But she is quiet when we leave the other guests,
like the bride at the table with her face deep,
caught in the chalice, determined to drink
to the polished bottom undisturbed.

We had known magic—the shuffling of body over body,
knees lifting the quilt like blue mountains. The changing
of thighs into tents with the moon coloring our cheeks,
not one disappearing without the other.

Only now she keeps ahead of me—
the magician who won't reveal the trick to the lover,
an audience that won't turn over its coins,
the look on the groom when the bride resurfaced, flushed,
from something newer than water. It rains and my wife stops
at the top of the hill. Her face, a profile to me,
throws open into a dark bowl, waiting.

The Rape of Saint Maria Goretti

How easy it was, trespassing you,
naïve as a city church, its pale oak doors
unlocked for transients to spread and enter.
Startled for a moment by stained glass
they rush to the front to grope the chalice,
finger and tear away the altar lace
and then retreat, leaving
one door moaning shut behind them.

And you were no vision either—no lolling head,
wet thigh muscles, crumpled sleeves
in St. Thérèse ecstasy for me to thrust to,
and yet so focused, distant, like the mermaid
on a ship's prow. I was not taking you
but your jealous God, who received
the buffets of my dagger as if this
was what faith was for—
to be a pincushion for man's need.
For minutes afterward—I clung to you,
your God, lovely in the wet drapery
I made of you, certain you had said: forgiven.

Section III

The Greatest of These

Storge: affectionate, frivolous love
Eros: romantic, physical love
Agape: spiritual love

Storge is the affection I have
for your jeweled thigh, its long white scar,
you, nine years old, chasing after the dog
in the backyard, tripping over the rake,
the old PVC pipe that sliced you deep—
and the way you tell it,
your hand chopping your leg right there,
I didn't even frown.

And *eros*, me knowing that your veins erupted
bringing opal to the skin's surface,
your young boy body sensing
I was coming with a lust for luxury.
The collagen, the collagen, the creation:
dried, stiffened, pearlized. Raised for me.

But *agape*. Agape is for your mother,
how when you were asleep, she'd lift
the sheet from your shape, and O,
the shoulders, the chest, the stomach,
the thigh with light glinting off the scar.
How she sighed at the evidence—
milk still whorled beneath your skin.

Vanitas Painting

All is vanity and a chase after wind (Ecclesiastes 1: 14)

In a room at the Fontainebleau Hotel
there is a rose quartz egg on a plastic pedestal,
a tiny wooden elephant, a marble bust of a man
whose skull is covered by chiseled hair.
This will be my blue room:
blue velvet blanket on the bed,
view of the swimming pool below,
an endless bar of soap at the sink.

If you were to…
and if I, as a result, went mad,
this would be the room to unravel in, though finding the beginning
of the thread would be tedious, for even carpet is shadowed.
Later, with my knees unspun about me, I'd tie the thread
around all my fingers this time, entertain no other man
but the bust of a man in this bed, ask him, how many magi
have cried here before me? And if yellow was the last color
you'd seen—the shivering sun crescents of a lemon
or a pair of eyes on a gilded sarcophagus,
I'd mourn that by closing curtains,
never checking out until clouds came spilling blues.

This Is My Body

At the beach, you raise the sand dollar
above your head—a priest consecrating the host.
You hand it to me, unblemished and whole:
the sea's reluctant wedding gift.
This is something I should shellac, drill
a hole through, hang from a ribbon on a window.

Each evening, you play in me
like a child at the shore, fingers plunging
deep into sand, hoping for the bubble
of a mussel. The moon, a wafer,
is brought out, revealed, exposed,
fastened by the prongs of the stars.

Below, the beachcombers stop, kneel
on their towels, their faces thrown back
to receive on the tongue. You go
to rig a fishing line—will you hook
the moon, display it creased
and collapsed? Do you know how to adore?

Stranded on an Island

Give me turquoise—
cold robin egg candy of the gods—
the kind that uncoils scoliosis,
flashes around the shape of the soul.
Turquoise—your veins, your eyes,
the sky we swam in when we were old.
Beautiful like a glacier, and I'd want to remember.

Did you know if you bury turquoise in soil raspy with thirst
it will sprout and yield natives, lean with their dancing bodies,
with hair volcano-ink black, who will circle you,
drawn to you like a village's fire and stoke you with stories
and yellow bread swaddled in leaves from a palm?

Yes, there would be turquoise shadowing my lids,
weighty turquoise orbiting my wrists,
though no driftwood and twine, no calfskin journal,
book of prayers, or photographs.
This is the way I'd want to go home.

Losing It at the Wakulla River

It was summer in Tallahassee
and we'd exhausted The Quarter Moon
and the clerk with an owl inked at his elbow—
the shop's feathered dream catchers,
the drawer of polished rocks, the vanilla smell
of incense sticks caught up in our hair.
We took a trip to the river.

The three of us, in one canoe,
dared one another to look over the edge
into the faces of deconstructed mastodons
or cave creatures who might grasp at our ankles
and take us, their slick arms opening
like the wings of a sunning anhinga—
they would pull us down through the ice cold
slouch and fold of the current, past the river grass,
its maze of sharp-toothed combs and slack braids—
we would never break surface again.

One of us dropped a leaf-shaped barrette.
It floated for a moment, silver, then disappeared into froth.
We banked near a cypress tree. A yellowed leather belt hung
from the lowest branch, the buckle clapping against itself.
We undressed and waded into tea-colored water.
All afternoon, we bobbed in the deepest part of the river,
the ends of our hair heavy, our palms resting on the surface,
giving them over for the water to read.

Quitting Our Lady of Grace Seminary

I like to think I made you do it—
my chartreuse off-the-shoulder dress.

You headed straight for the pier
and waited with a construction paper heart
and an empty wallet,

the sky around you smudged
like silver and violet makeup on a woman
who hasn't stopped dancing all evening.

I met you there,
the water underneath rolled out
like a bolt of black fabric.

Your skin was dry. The hem of my dress lifted
in the static charge. You'd forgotten
how to tilt your face towards mine.

Much later, you sprawled across my lap
on the wooden planks. There was a struggle
of fins and wings below us, and you shifted

in your sleep. The moon cast you in marble.

In the Photo We've Framed

Your open hand is fastened
at my lower back
like a brooch for my gown.
You're leaning into my ear,
or the lavender in my hair.

Guests in the background in sleeveless dresses,
uncles from Chicago in pinstripe,
have thrown their arms into the air.
My father waits in the corner
for another dance with me.

Years ago, I found a photo of my mother
from their honeymoon. In a cabin on an island
she lies on the bed, her arms and legs displaced
and bent like a crime scene victim,
a nightdress riding up to a shadow
at her inner thigh. She is sleeping.

Afterward, in the hotel lobby,
you'll crouch and brush the birdseed from my skin.
From a distance someone might think
you're painting a watercolor,
a streaky bridge and sky, into my lap.

You Burn Me

There's never a faucet nearby to stream cold water over,
or a washcloth with ice, though it's not until later—
after I've stirred butter and a chicken breast on the stove,
used my good plate with the painted white birds—
that I feel the prickle and smart of it.
And I don't know where, at my hip,
behind my ear, the shelf you've made
on my collarbone. There's nothing to do
but to find you again. I won't say I'm a moth
or a child with flickering hands, only a woman
in love with the light in your hair. To be safe,
we could meet in the rain, in a parking lot's flood—
my fingers hovering over your skin,
until one by one, I'd fit them onto the flute of your back.
And to the cars passing slowly with blazing headlights,
we'd be rinsed—we'd be cooled and quivering.

Spring

The first week it turns warm again
the bees throw themselves at our window,
and we're unsure of what they'd want in here
when we pull the blinds to look out at all the green.
The bees tap like fingernails. The bees throw themselves
like pebbles against the glass—trying for us,
or the steel blue bedspread, their abdomens full
and round. Today, you don't mind that the man
in the apartment across us is washing his windows,
that there's a woman on a balcony cutting open
a bag of potting soil. The bees continue to beat
on the window, and you take my fingers into your mouth.

Lullaby for the Father

We sensed the moment it happened.
A startle. Slick coil. Eve's
echoing howl causing you
to relinquish your hold on my breasts,
delving deep into my labyrinth,
where snapping wolves were waiting
to encircle, guard, *the thing*.
For months you must veil your face
from me, eyes lowered
from the stony Venus I've become,
fearing you will shatter to pieces
on the rock of my pelvis, your wrists
entangled in the chaos of my hair.
Your vein, your vein, you murmur
in your sleep; the one, icy blue,
breaking out behind my knee.
You're surprised how I've changed.

Late-Night Feeding

These nights I'm tempted to find the nearest river,
wade into its black chill, push her away in a basket—
until a goddess on a clay bank unswaddles her,
swooning at her proportions knit so tightly
to the golden ratio that I cannot claim her as my own.
Afterward, I will have to choose: look over
my shoulder and transform into a marble statue, forever
planted in the water with fissures breaking across my hips,
nipples weathered by the wind, or—return home and slip
in next to you. I'd wear a plum negligee, you would forgive
me my sin and my breasts—leaking without her.

Final Scene with Jimmy Stewart

After he grabs the girl by the shoulders
who is slight and always wrapped in an hourglass coat.
After he shakes her, mildly,
his hair licking his forehead,
his necktie black and white diamonds,
trousers billowing around those long legs.
After he whispers *silly darling*
and she admits that she has been,
and they collide in a kiss and an overture—
does he take her back with him?

Does he sprawl on the bed with those impossibly
long legs stretched out before him,
while camisole, girdle, and garters
are loosened? Does he take the clip
from her hair and gape as the whole room
blooms Zinfandel-blonde—
the cigarette diving from his lips
when finally the panty hose lie crumpled
like empty firefly nets?

And when his trousers fall away
and she sees that his legs are nothing
but insect and bone,
does she suddenly remember she's missing
her hat, the one with the feather quill
that must have fallen in the snow
in their passion, and would he please
be a dear and hail a cab?