IT’S DIFFERENT WITH PUPPETS

A thesis presented to

the faculty of

the College of Arts and Sciences of Ohio University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Master of Arts

Lydia M. McDermott

June 2007
This thesis entitled

IT’S DIFFERENT WITH PUPPETS

by

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has been approved for

the Department of English

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Abstract

MCDERMOTT, LYDIA M., M.A., June 2007, English

IT’S DIFFERENT WITH PUPPETS (91 pp.)

Director of Thesis: Sharmila Voorakkara

This is a collection of poetry preceded by a critical introduction entitled, “Cleaving the Body to/from/in My Poems: A Critical Introduction.” The introduction explores the way in which I use the female body within my poems to validate a space for this body in literature. I compare and contrast my poems to the poems of Sharon Olds, Denise Duhamel, and Beth Ann Fennely, to name a few. The creative portion of the thesis deals with the subject of the female body in many arenas, but is not limited to this subject.

Approved: __________________________________________________________________________

Sharmila Voorakkara

Assistant Professor of English
To my children, Fionn and Sawyer.
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my husband, Michael Ensor. Without his constant support as husband and as father, I never could have finished this manuscript. I’d also like to thank my two sons, Fionn and Sawyer, who have been ever patient with their mother and provided a lot of the material for my poetry. For their creative input and support, I would like to thank Sharmila Voorakkara, Mark Halliday and Jill Rosser. I also thank Marilyn Atlas for her encouragement and guidance.
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Cleaving the Body to/from/in My Poems

. . . I have done this thing,
I and the other women this exceptional
act with the exceptional heroic body,
this giving birth, this glistening verb,
and I am putting my proud American boast
right here with the others.

— Sharon Olds, “The Language of the Brag”

In my quest to understand a recent trend in my own poetry to invoke my body and its particular female experience, I reencountered this Sharon Olds poem, “The Language of the Brag.” She begins the poem “I have wanted excellence in the knife-throw, / I have wanted to use my exceptionally strong and accurate arms” and continues through a list of “have wanted”s until she settles on the truth that she has “…done what you wanted to do, Walt Whitman, Allen Ginsberg, I have done this thing” which she further describes in the above excerpt as “this glistening verb.” This is a lovely collocation that deserves attention. The word “glistening” calls to mind the newborn baby, still covered in its mothers’ fluids, pink and wet, and “verb” refers to so much: carrying a child, dealing with all the discomforts that she lists within the poem, labor, birth and ultimately the writing of this poem. Since she addresses Walt Whitman and Allen Ginsberg, she resolutely places herself as a representative American poet because she has done this “glistening verb.” This entire process described in the poem of carrying and then giving birth to a child is an effective comparison to the creative process of poetry, but I believe it represents more, that somehow the two are intertwined and not just metaphorical. This is a great poem not just because of the way that poetry can gestate like a baby, but because
it deals with the language of this process. Similarly many of my recent poems are dealing with the language of the female body, in its various processes, from menstruation to sex to giving birth and nursing. Is this typical? Unusual? It has not been typical in my own work, but perhaps I am only just catching onto a wave of women’s poetry that has been describing the taboo of the woman’s body as a libratory process for some time. In particular I seem to be following in the footsteps of some fairly contemporary American women poets, though the body has been circulating in our poetry since we started writing it.

In “The Circular Journey of Poetry and Children,” Karen Haas-Howland, a contemporary poet, writes, “Our poems often circle us, years before we consider them. They are inside us in a similar way to how our grandmothers carry us in their bodies the last five months of their pregnancy. Our egg rests secretly within her daughter who dreams in utero” (9). For women it is natural to compare the creation of art to the creation of human life, and there is a distinction in how women speak of procreation and how men do. There is a distinction in the language available to us. In Julia Penelope’s book about gendered language, Speaking Freely, she illustrates this point by describing the functions of two words, mother and father.

Two verbs show how thoroughly the dichotomy between the male as sexual actor and the female as breeder structures the syntax of the reproductive process: mother and father. One might expect these verbs to be semantically and syntactically symmetrical, but they aren’t. As a verb, father denotes the act of fertilization . . . Unlike father, mother doesn’t describe the act of conceiving. Unlike other female animals, women don’t have a unique verb that describes the process of ejecting a baby from the womb. (188)
Mother cannot be extended in the English language to mean *the moment my egg received a sperm* and whereas we have verbs in English for when some female animals give birth, (a cow “calves,” for instance), we do not have one clear verb for this process in human women. Perhaps this is the “verb” that glistens in Olds’ poem as well.

How is this use of language in poetry unique to women’s poetry? Alicia Ostriker discusses this newer vein in women’s poetry in her book, *Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women’s Poetry in America*, in which she describes the historical evolution of American women’s poetry that has become distinctly female. She says:

> During the last two decades, [she wrote this in 1986] American women poets have been writing about their bodies with decreasing embarrassment and increasing enthusiasm. … They write about giving birth, giving suck … contemporary women poets employ anatomical imagery both far more frequently and far more intimately than male poets. (92)

She goes on to describe how uncomfortable many men are with this poetry, which I find very fascinating because of my own experiences in a poetry workshop, and the reactions my poems received from the male students. Though I do not consider my workshop experience to be an instance that can be broadly applied to all men and women, it did spur my own interest in how I use the body in my poetry and why people react in different ways to it. In order to discuss this more fully, I’d like to refer to a series of poems that I have written recently that received mixed reactions in workshop. I’ll start by discussing a poem that explicitly deals with a male resistance to this type of women’s poetry, “My Husband Doesn’t Like It When I Write.” This particular poem illustrates the tension I, the poet, feel writing about the physical aspects of my life, as if they are not worthy of literary attention. It begins following directly from the title, syntactically:
poems about myself. He prefers
when I use second or third person,
giving instructions, ruminating
on life’s generalities. But the specifics
are what get me, always. (ll 1-5).

It also illustrates a tension between husband and wife on the subject of the writing, as
well as their roles in the childbirth experience:

keeping up with my husband,
the first face both my children
ever saw. How does that make him
feel? To look into the blinking gray
blue eyes of a new human,
wrinkled brow figuring out this bright
glaring world and settling
on one face,
his face,
not my face? (ll. 43-52)

I see the two as intricately related; these are my two great acts of creation, my children
and my poetry, and in this poem I am distanced from both of them. Though I flirt with
the body language I am discussing in this paper in lines like “cut / from my womb for
lack / of room” and perhaps in the collocation, “I cannot cuddle with a breastpump,” I am
not nearly as explicit as the Sharon Olds poem, yet. This poem did not pose too many
problems for the men in my workshop, perhaps because to illustrate the very tension I am
discussing, I skirt the issue of the body, remaining to my children an upside down head,

without the function of my body at all:

. . . Myself,
splayed on a table
unable to move anything
but my head, greeting them
each in turn with a hazy
upside down grin, an upside down
world to enter. I welcome
them with open arms
that cannot hold them . . . (ll. 21-9)

I hint in this poem at another aspect of women’s poetry, confessional poetry: “... my own feelings / pouring out all over the place, / embarrassing and sloppy / and so feminine. I cannot help confessing...” (ll. 7-10). Though this type of poetry is also written by men, women’s confessional poetry is slightly different, according to Sandra M. Gilbert. She writes in “‘My Name Is Darkness’: The Poetry of Self-Definition” that “the self-defining confessional genre, with its persistent assertions of identity and its emphasis on a central mythology of the self, may be (at least for our own time) a distinctively female poetic mode” (118). She goes on to explain that female confessional poets do not remove themselves through irony in the poem, as their male counterparts do, because the female poet does not feel representative of “Everyman,” she feels particular. Certainly, in this poem of mine, I play with my ability or inability to detach, and I make a remark that “I cannot help confessing // all the time.” Another point about women’s confessional poetry, or rather an extension on what has just been said, is that “when a woman poet says ‘I’ she is likely to mean the actual ‘I’ as intensely as her verbal skills permit” (Ostriker “Nerves” 315). In this poem, I am certainly I, as can be seen in my explanation of the poem, despite my purposeful avoidance of an explicitly confessional language.

I have not yet really alienated my male peers, so we will move on to the next poem that deals with a subject that has been traditionally taboo, and deals with the burden of that secret: menstruation. The poem, “Pocket,” made more men in the workshop uncomfortable and confused. The poem is narrative and describes a girl’s awareness of
the impending cycle of menstruation at the onset of puberty. Specifically it deals with a symbol of that change in a large purple purse she is forced to carry to school.\textsuperscript{5} And I remember feeling my face turn red as I read it. Why? The tension in this poem is humorous, so shouldn’t it be more comfortable? But it’s not, because it’s about menstruation, and as much as we are inundated with commercials for “feminine products,” the subject is still taboo. The males in the class were confused about the “anger issues” in the poem, whereas the women all just laughed knowingly. Originally, when I workshopped the poem, it was entitled “Purse” and the last stanza read:

\begin{quote}
I never took the purple traitor back
to school, and I didn’t start
‘til seventh grade anyway.
\end{quote}

The impact and focus of the poem is significantly different, and I would be curious to hear the men’s reactions now. The new last stanza reads:

\begin{quote}
I put the purple giant in the closet
and started wearing only pants
with pockets, so I could keep my secret
close, until I could keep it
closer still. (ll. 42-6)
\end{quote}

Changing the title to “Pocket” and ending with the new stanza, refocuses the poem on my body, so that \textit{pocket} takes on a transformative meaning, going from the purse compartment, to the pants’ pocket, to the “pocket” of female genitalia. I imagine this would have gotten more negative feedback.

Several women poets also deal with the topic of menstruation, and the onset of puberty for girls, in varying degrees of humor and seriousness. Adrienne Rich deals with
the subject quite seriously in her 1967 poem, “5:30 AM,” in which she meditates on the similarities between the hunted fox and the bleeding woman. It opens:

Birds and periodic blood.
Old capitulations.
The fox, panting, fire-eyed,
gone to earth in my chest.
How beautiful we are,
she and I, with our auburn pelt, our trails of blood (ll. 1-7)

The beginning of this poem envisions blood as beautiful, but the ending becomes sinister:

“killer, being that / inanely single-minded / will have our skins at last” (ll. 22-24). The blood is compared to the blood of a wounded fox, who will eventually die and give up it’s prized skin for men. My poem, though dealing with the burden of menstruation as secretive, is primarily humorous.

In her book, Kinky, Denise Duhamel explores women’s relationships to their bodies through the persona of Barbie, the doll. Naturally this is a fairly funny collection, though with serious and perceptive undertones. She deals with Barbie’s realization that she cannot menstruate and her subsequent absence of power in a prose poem titled, “Barbie and Carrie.” Barbie is watching a scene in the horror film, Carrie, and humorously draws a connection between Carrie’s menstrual cycle and her power of telekinesis, wishing such a power for herself. Though Barbie is misguided in her connection between Carrie’s supernatural power and her very natural onset of menstruation, she is correct that without menstruation she lacks a fundamental power: the power to reproduce, and subsequently the power to belong to womankind. My poem also
deals with menstruation in a humorous manner, though the focus is on the secretive, rather than on the powerful.

Since analyzing Duhamel’s poem has already brought a horror film into the discussion, I’d like to look at my poem “Friday, 1am: Horror (93mins)” and compare it to another of Duhamel’s poems, “Kinky.” My poem takes place in an alternate reality within a B-slasher film, in which sorority girls are killing one another and their mates. The poem plays up the eroticism, objectification and violence of this type of horror film in an effort in some respect to critique the societal roles that make these films possible.

Here is one excerpt that illustrates the mode of the poem:

Poor Tad’s head is now rolling past the bowling pins into that dark mouth and Amanda’s macaroon breasts are splattered with his blood, while Tammy bends (back scooped so her short shorts reveal a curve of possibility) and picks the fire-hatchet up one more time, evil glint in her lined eye. (ll. 9-16)

The ridiculousness of the fictive situation is intensified in phrases like “macaroon breasts,” which highlights their visual consumption, and “evil glint in her lined eye,” which accentuates the “whore” role she is fulfilling. But what I find to be the most interesting part of the poem is the ending, in which the cleaning lady, Mrs. Finkham, is imagined to come in the next morning and clean the bowling alley. This move to the mundane reality of cleaning the mess accentuates even more the disjunction between the film world and the real world of real women.
Duhamel’s poem also deals with the potential erotic possibilities of violence, dismemberment, and role reversal. In “Kinky,” Barbie and Ken switch heads, as well as gender roles in an effort to liven up their “sex” life. Because of their lack of genitals, they must explore other erotic options with their bodies. What is really interesting and humorous in this poem is that the choices they make to fulfill their erotic needs are not so far removed from real human eroticism. As is obvious in my poem, violence and dismemberment (particularly of the female body) is often cast in erotic terms in horror films. Duhamel’s poem, however, does not have the critical tone that my poem has. It seems to simply be exploring taboo, “deviant” sexual behaviors of real people through the personified dolls’ desires.

The next two poems I’d like to look at deal with another aspect of language in women’s poetry, “revisionist mythology,” though they still deal intimately with the body. Ostricker discusses this in women’s poetry: “Where women write strongly as women, it is clear that their intention is to subvert and transform the life and literature they inherit. … [I] suggest that revisionist mythmaking in women’s poetry is a means of redefining both woman and culture” (Stealing 211). The next poem, “Goddess,” takes as its project the redefining of a particular image of a mythical goddess. It explores the realities and discomforts of breastfeeding in opposition to an image in a painting of a goddess sitting peacefully while her nipples pour forth a river of milk.

This poem caused the most discomfort for the men in the workshop. They could not visualize it, they did not want the details, and they wanted it to sound more removed and “mythic.” Though they had good intentions, they missed the project of the poem. To
sound more mythic or detached, would not demystify the godly. To avoid the details would avoid the work that does the demystification. I am always open to criticism of a poem, but I am fairly confident that the resistance to this poem had little to do with its poetic art.

The workshop leader, Sharmila Voorakkara, and myself talked about this jokingly after class. I found the male reactions to my poems amusing and at the time she said she found them somewhat disturbing. She found this poem to be powerful and I remember her spending a lot of time defending its merits in workshop. Why did the men resist it? Perhaps the topic was embarrassing, as Sharmila suggested to me, but why should it be? Breastfeeding is taboo? Another possibility is that it is just so entirely out of their scope of existence that they cannot relate. But I would like to mention that the male experience of life has been made into literature and read by women for centuries, men always assuming that their topic is broad enough for everyone to relate to. Therefore, I do think there is power in writing and ultimately in publishing work that deals explicitly in the language of women’s lives, and their physicality. Adrienne Rich reflects on her own awakening in poetry to the possibility of the female body, among other things, being a subject worthy of poetry in her essay “Blood, Bread, and Poetry”:

To write directly and overtly as a woman, out of a woman’s body and experience, to take women’s existence seriously as theme and source for art, was something I had been hungering to do, needing to do, all my writing life . . . it released tremendous energy in me, as in many other women, to have that way of writing affirmed and validated in a growing political community. I felt for the first time the closing of the gap between poet and woman. (182)
The debunking of the myth is important, and so is the language with which the debunking is done: a language of the female body.

Beth Ann Fennelly explores the body of a mother throughout her collection, *Tender Hooks*. She specifically deals with the changing relationship of a woman to her breasts through the process of breastfeeding and weaning in the four-part poem, “Latch On, Falling Off.” In section three, “After Weaning, My Breasts Resume Their Lives As Glamour Girls,” she perhaps provides an answer to my previous question about why men might find a poem about the pain of breastfeeding uncomfortable. In it, her husband comments, “Aren’t you glad?” as she unwraps her sexy bras from her pre-nursing life:

_Aren’t you glad?_ He’s walking  
toward them, addressing them, it seems—  
but, Darling, they can’t answer,  
poured back into their old mold,  
muffled beneath these lovely laces,  
relearning how it feels, seen and not heard. (Fennelly 27)

Maybe the men in my workshop did not want to see breasts as functional, as purposeful beyond visual titillation. After all, in popular media, it is much more common to see breasts in a sexual situation than in a motherly one.

The next poem I wish to discuss, “Cleave,” also deals with mythology, but not in the same way. Aside from this, it illustrates a principle of women’s erotic poetry that Ostricker explains: “these are poems which challenge the concept of the fixed self-other boundary” (*Stealing* 168). The poem describes sex from a woman’s point of view. By the second stanza, the two lovers are described in this way: “We were one deity, split /
male and female, cleaving / at the hip . . .” (ll. 6-9). But by the end of the poem, the speaker says:

And now I rest on my side 
of the bed and am momentarily 
annoyed to see your pillow 
overlapping mine. (ll. 12-15)

Though this poem illustrates how women’s discussion of the erotic in poetry blends the other and the self, it does something else in my opinion. It shows a woman’s autonomy after the sex act, a reestablishing of boundaries, hence the play on the title word “cleave,” which Biblically can mean to bind together, but can also mean to cut apart. I feel this is important because traditionally women are seen as dependent on men for identity and for pleasure. In this poem, the woman actively partakes in pleasure and actively asserts her own identity when she is satisfied. The problem with the poem is that it is not explicitly female, though it might be assumed that the speaker is female because the poet is a woman, the language of the poem does not necessarily clue the reader in. Or does it?

Earlier I discovered that women poets often use the “I” to mean an actual “I,” so can it be inferred because I am a woman poet that this is the case? I’m not sure that argument is sound. Is the description of the erotic peculiarly female? According to Ostriker’s description of the erotic in women’s poetry, perhaps it is. Still, this is a question I will need to consider more closely.

Interestingly, this poem did not cause any controversy in the workshop, because I think that the female perception of the erotic has become more acceptable still than the very physical, explicit descriptions of her role as mother. This in itself is interesting. Why is it more disturbing to a man to read about the pain involved in nursing than to read
about a woman’s experience of the erotic? Is it because they are entirely excluded from the one and intimately involved in the other?

I plan to continue in this vein in my writing, to participate in the “glistening verb” that Sharon Olds enacts in her poem. I believe that there are important revolutionary implications in allowing the language of the woman’s experience of the body into literature. As disturbing as the idea of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis might be because of its controlling implications, (a la George Orwell’s Newspeak), it could imply transformative power as well. Feminists have been trying to reclaim the language for decades now. We no longer use the personal pronoun “he” to mean anyone. Does this in turn change our thinking patterns? I believe that is part of the hope in changing the language. Children can possibly imagine a doctor who is a woman, because the pronoun is not always “he.” If this is the case, then developments in poetry and literature as a whole can also change our ways of thinking. If the female experience can be validated as art, will it cease to be taboo? Will this affect how breastfeeding is seen in public arenas? Could it change the “prince charming” myth? Could it free women of some of the unhealthy expectations placed on them as mothers by society? I would like to believe it can, so I will continue to write in a language that is a woman’s language, even at the risk of alienating male readers. Perhaps as more and more women poets and writers use this language, men will start to feel included.

Works Cited


I have wanted excellence in the knife-throw,
I have wanted to use my exceptionally strong and accurate arms and my straight posture and quick electric muscles to achieve something at the center of a crowd, the blade piercing the bark deep, the haft slowly and heavily vibrating like the cock.
I have wanted some epic use for my excellent body, some heroism, some American achievement beyond the ordinary for my extraordinary self, magnetic and tensile, I have stood by the sandlot and watched the boys play.

I have wanted courage, I have thought about fire and crossing of waterfalls, I have dragged around my belly big with cowardice and safety, stool charcoal from the iron pills, huge breasts leaking colostrums, legs swelling, hands swelling, face swelling and reddening, hair falling out, inner sex stabbed again and again with pain like a knife. I have lain down.

I have lain down and sweated and shaken and passed blood and shit a water and slowly alone in the center of a circle I have passed the new person out and they have lifted the new person free of the act and wiped the new person free of that language of blood like praise all over the body.

I have done what you wanted to do, Walt Whitman, Allen Ginsberg, I have done this thing, I and the other women this exceptional act with this exceptional heroic body, this giving birth, this glistening verb, and I am putting my proud American boast right here with the others. (Olds 44-5)

2 My list by necessity leaves out numerous “female” bodily experiences. I do not consider my self representative of all women, nor do I consider all women to be essentially the same. My poetry deals with my body, so the scope of the female body in the introduction is limited. I am a fairly young, white, middle class American woman. I am aware that my experience is in many ways particular to my circumstances, but it is all I have.

3 Earlier poets, such as Anne Bradstreet, also deal with these taboo subjects, but I trace my influences from contemporary poets, who in their turn may have been influenced by

4 See p. 53

5 See p. 32

6 5:30 AM

Birds and periodic blood.
Old recapitulations.
The fox, panting, fire-eyed,
gone to earth in my chest.
How beautiful we are, she and I, with our auburn pelts, our trails of blood, our miracle escapes, our whiplash panic flogging us on to new miracles!
They’ve supplied us with pills for bleeding, pills for panic.
Wash them down the sink.
This is truth then:
dull needle groping in the spinal fluid, weak acid in the bottom of the cup, foreboding, foreboding. No one tells the truth about truth, that it’s what the fox sees from her scuffled burrow:
dull-jawed, onrushing iller, being that inanely single-minded will have our skins at last. (Rich 106-7)

7 Barbie and Carrie

Barbie catches Carrie as a late-night movie. “Plug it up!” shout a group of mean teenagers while Sissy Spacek’s character crouches in her high school’s locker room shower. Carrie’s Mother, a religious fanatic, hasn’t prepared her daughter for her first menses.

On her couch, Barbie hugs a bowl of make-believe popcorn. She thinks about how she doesn’t ever bleed, even when she’s cut. She’s laughed politely at jokes about her
nebulous time of the month, but she knows nothing of cramps, mood swings, or bloating. She wears her white tennis shorts whenever she wants to and feels an absence of anything in particular when she gazes at the ever-changing moon. The only time Barbie used a sanitary napkin, it was a makeshift mattress. She once held a junior size Tampax as a whiffle-ball bat. “Even Stephen King, who wrote the novel, and Brian DePalma, who made the film, understand the nature of female cycles better than I do, and they’re human men.”

Barbie’s been told over and over again that she’s been blessed with the best of adventures and fashion. But tonight she finds herself looking to dowdy Carrie as her heroine. Barbie knows nothing of telekinesis—she can’t even will herself to move, never mind a pencil or ashtray. She watches the TV admiringly as Carrie takes her own life into her hands. And Barbie wishes she could experience the curse at least once. (Duhamel 54)

8 See p. 73

9 Kinky

They decide to exchange heads. Barbie squeezes the small opening under her chin over Ken’s bulging neck socket. His wide jaw line jostles atop his girlfriend’s body, loosely, like one of those nodding novelty dogs destined to gaze from the back windows of cars. The two dolls chase each other around the orange Country Camper unsure what they’ll do when they’re within touching distance. Ken wants to feel Barbie’s toes between his lips, take off one of her legs and force his whole arm inside her. With only the vaguest suggestion of genitals, all the alluring qualities they possess as fashion dolls, up until now, have done neither of them much good. But suddenly Barbie is excited looking at her own body under the weight of Ken’s face. He is part circus freak, part thwarted hermaphrodite. And she is imagining she is somebody else—maybe somebody middle class and ordinary, maybe another teenage model being caught in scandal.

The night had begun with Barbie getting angry at finding Ken’s blow-up doll, folded and stuffed under the couch. He was defensive and ashamed, especially about not have the breath to inflate her. But after a round of pretend-tears, Barbie and Ken vowed to try to make their relationship work. With their good memories
as sustaining as good food, they listened to late-night radio
talk shows, one featuring Dr. Ruth. *When all else fails,*
*just hold each other,* the small sex therapist crooned.
Barbie and Ken, on cue, groped in the dark,
their interchangeable skin glowing, the color of Band-Aids.
Then, they let themselves go—soon Barbie was begging Ken
to try on her spandex miniskirt. She showed him how
to pivot as though he were on a runway. Ken begged
to tie Barbie onto his yellow surfboard and spin her
on the kitchen table until she grew dizzy. *Anything,*
*anything,* they both said to the other’s requests.
their mirrored desires bubbling from the most unlikely places. (Duhamel 30-1)

10 See p. 59

11 III. After Weaning, My Breasts Resume Their Lives as Glamour Girls

Initially hesitant, yes,
but once called into duty,
they never looked back.

Models-turned-spokeswomen,
they never dreamed they’d have so much to say.
They swelled with purpose,

mastered that underwater tongue,
translating the baby’s long-vowel cries
and oozing their answer,

tidal, undeniable, fulfilled.
For a year, they let the child draw forth
that starry river, as my friend Ann has termed it—

then, it was time, stopped the flow.
They are dry now, smaller, tidy, my nipples
the lighter, more fetching pink.

The bras ugly as Ace bandages,
thick-strapped, trap-doored,
too busy for beauty—

and the cotton pads lining them
until damp, then yeasting in the hamper—
all have been washed and stored away.

So I’m thinking of how,
when World War II had ended,
the factory-working wives

were fired, sent home
to care for returning soldiers,
when my husband enters the bedroom—

_Aren’t you glad?_ he asks, glad,
watching me unwrap bras
tissue-thin and decorative

from the tissue of my old life,
watching, worshipfully, the breasts resettle
as I fasten his red favorite—

_Aren’t you glad?_ He’s walking
toward them, addressing them, it seems—
but, Darling, they can’t answer,

poured back into their old mold,
muffled beneath these lovely laces,
relearning how it feels, seen and not heard. (Fenelly 24-7)

12 See p. 43.
It’s Different With Puppets
It’s Different With Puppets

I move my jaw slowly down
   and up to chew the walnuts,
   grinding them, almost imperceptibly.
   Perhaps you see an occasional dent
   in each cheek, notice the lowering
   motion of the jaw. But you cannot see
   my tongue undulating the pieces back
   toward the uvula, you cannot see
the soggy granules tumble down
   the back of my throat, my epiglottis
   dipping, blocking my trachea just in time.

Do not talk with your mouth full.
   Not only is it rude, it is life threatening.
My jaw moves the same way when I speak,
   watch it, down and up
the bottom jaw swinging on its hinge.
   Take careful note.

    If you want to pass as one of us,
you will have to master this movement.
    You give yourself away always
with that crazy-head-jerk-grin-talk you do.
    Practice makes perfect, friend.
Do it in a mirror, carefully hold
your head still with one hand,
   then talk, down—up—down.
Girl Waiting
Halley’s Comet, 1986, 10 Years Old

The year of the comet, I was newspaper reporter, interviewing my parents’ friends, researching facts about the comet. *Mark Twain was born with the comet in the sky and died 76 years later, the comet visible again, but he must not have seen it at all, I report.*

*In ancient cultures, the comet was feared, dubbed Harbinger of Doom or Menace of the Universe. In Switzerland, Halley's Comet was blamed for earthquakes, illnesses, red rain, and even the births of two-headed animals. In England, it caused the black plague.*

We picked a spot in the cow pasture on top of a small hill, pond below, salt lick nearby. As the sky purpled, we went out. Afraid of the bulls, my father carried me on his shoulders, weaved between cow patties and cows, tipping slightly now and then, tipsy, but always holding my legs.

I sat against him on the tartan blanket, keeping warm against his soft belly. The adults all smoked and through the winding clouds we stared at the sky, stars switching on here and there, cows lowing behind us, bullfrogs bellowing below, a rubberband band. And then the comet surfaced on the sky, slower than I expected and just larger than the stars, a little tail behind, but not spectacular, not horrific, a streak sliding across the sky, a squished lightning bug across a dark hand, though I knew it was a fiery ball of ice and that it placed me in history. There was nothing to report.
I rode my father’s shoulders back, watching for signs, listening to cows. Nothing. I held the top of his head, soft black curls intertwining my fingers, for balance as we swayed together. *Amazing*, he said, squeezing my legs. Yes, Dad, I know.
Pocket

A purse: pastel purple and large with three zippered compartments, yellow, pink and baby blue. Hideous and wonderful for the secrets it could hold. I try to make the best of it. I fill a notebook with a long list of things I’ve not yet done but hope to do, and place it in the pink pocket:

Ride a horse; travel to Europe, to Paris, to Brazil, to Ireland, to New York City; try out for choir, for a play, for cheerleading?; see the ocean, the mountains, the Empire State Building, a Broadway play, a naked man; have sex?; write a novel, the novel, the poem, an autobiography; learn to play the violin (to fiddle, not to play orchestra music), knitting, ballet, Kung Fu; see Bruce Lee’s grave; move away from Ohio…

I put different colors and flavors of lip balms in the yellow pocket, as well as some pony tail holders and spare change for Nutty Bars, but who am I fooling? Every fifth grade girl (and boy for that matter) knows what’s behind the baby blue zipper.

This is the year in which we are separated by sex, and shown a film explaining our bodies’ recent and eventual mutations; given a booklet with color illustrations so we know exactly how many little hairs to expect before the big day.

And I’m not there yet! I’m so far from there. Totally far from that road! 28 minus A, not even A, training bra, just a shortened undershirt really, but my mother is sure I’m growing up fast, swears she can see my nipples through my favorite pink sweater and she wouldn’t want me to get caught in an embarrassing situation with my new white jeans.

I lugged that purple purse around all year until one day, on the playground, I swung it quickly around my head, like a helicopter, or num chucks, and hit Jennifer B. (not
to be confused with Jennifer H. or Jenny S., and not Heather A. who looks just as perfect and grown up) right in her perfect nearly-teenage breasts (nearly a B, I’d say) and she went crying to Mrs. B., and I got a note home telling my mother I had “anger issues.”

I put the purple giant in the closet and started wearing only pants with pockets, so I could keep my secret close, until I could keep it closer still.
Sleepover:

(Memory After Hearing That My Childhood Friend Won the City’s Biggest Beauty Contest)

The popular girls flew above us,
their buoyant bangs small balloons
on their powdered foreheads, their permed hair
winged out stiff to the sides, the back a neat
cascade of kinky waves. Their radiant
rouged mascaraed faces smirked down
from the heights of Jr. High celebrity.

At twelve, Lisa and I were small
breastless boyish girls, no maxi pads
to inconvenience us so glamorously.
We were playing horses and wizards
in the yard, mixing potions in the bathroom
with perfume, lotion, and baby powder.
We traded stickers, Garbage Pail Kids,
and plastic charms.

One night, we decided to take control,
spent every cent of our allowances on that magic
woman stuff, makeup: nude foundation, loose powder,
little yellow sticks to cover purple circles, pink
blush that glittered, frosty eye shadows,
green mascara and blue eyeliner.

All night we practiced this new art; made fish
faces to find our cheeks and pink the apples there; stretched
our eyes to line the inside of the lower lids blue, dark,
mysteriously squinty; lined lips outside the lines
and filled them in with gloss, perfectly pouty;
teased our hair and sprayed it still.

Giggling and preening, sipping bubbling juice
from plastic wine glasses, we felt the glamour. And then
in a freakish moment of midnight clarity, we caught
our reflections in each other: Who were these girls?
We clutched our Pound Puppies by their clipped plush tails, buried our faces, rubbed their embroidered hearts, and bled blue-green onto their soft bellies.
Little Miss Muffet

was on a diet. She took her lunch of lowfat cottage cheese outside on a stool so she didn’t have to watch the others eating hamburgers and pizza. She mixed in pears to spice it up a little and proceeded to savor each little curd, hoping it would fill her if she took her time. Then, wouldn’t you know it? Along came a big, nasty spider. Muffet breathed deep—she was not going to run. She looked at the hairy thing, stared it down, ignored the gut instinct that told her to get the hell out of there. And then, that damn spider crawled right under her and bit a big juicy cheek. So then, she jumped, screamed, ran—typical girl--but man that hurt. Next day, she woke up big and muscular—weight-lifter-muscular—and she had kind of (you guessed it) a spider-sense—quick, limber, strong. Turned out that spider was radioactive, turned her into some kind of Super-Spider-Muffet. Now she eats steak rare, licks the blood off the plate. Fuck curds and whey. She’s big and powerful and hungry.
Girl Waiting

I believe I have alternate selves stunted
at some crucial point where I,
my self, turned away.

There’s one in Seattle, plodding through drizzle
just as I have been doing here. She walks
to get out of a cramped Victorian apartment
and she carries a young toddler on her hip
to a coffee shop where everybody knows her name
and the baby’s. Sometimes he sleeps and she
reads, or she follows his toddle sipping
what she can, before it gets cold.
Sometimes she cherishes this small sphere
they inhabit alone, together and sometimes
she finds her jaw clenched.

There’s another self near that self in Seattle,
on a mountain the other self can see
on clear days from the roof of her building.
This mountain self perpetually hikes a steep trail
around the mountain in October, when the rain
can easily slip into snow.
Her pack is always overfull. Her knees
ache and she feels she can barely move anymore.
She is wet and cold, with a man
who also aches. She can cry
in front of him.

There is, actually, another self here,
in this small college town, stumbling
down the brick streets. She may even
be writing poetry. I don’t know. I avoid
the haunts where I might find her.
She is an obnoxious drunk.
There are various selves with other men:
the self in Queens with the actor who has not yet
lost it, but she can feel it coming; the self
riding cramped busses through Turkey,
an Englishman wrapped tightly around her—
they keep traveling, so they are happy;
the self with the boy in a dorm room; in another
dorm room; in a park; a car; a stranger’s house.
They are all slipping together,
sliding apart, slipping again.

Do the selves wonder
about me? Are they researching the possibilities
of reincarnation, doppelgangers, soulmates? Do they try
to reach me? Séances? Mediums? Priests?
Perhaps I am just
a vague sense of loss.

One of them is lying on a couch
in a living room decorated like a funeral parlor,
stuffed dog by her side.
It is always just getting dark.
A black and white movie
is always just ending on TV.
She has chicken pox and is trying
not to scratch—imagine that constant crawling itch.
She is alone in the house, waiting
for her father to get home. She keeps
looking at the window and keeps not-scratching, and keeps
waiting long past bedtime.
Cleave
Cleave
Mount Rainier, a Honeymoon

There was a mountain, and before that
a mountain, a hill we scraped down, brakes
crunching ominously, curves and ocean, blue
and large, but the crunching, the crunching

and before that, a desert, hills, mountains, cacti,
the Hoover Dam, and before that, desert, surreal
night-light landscape, visual noise everywhere,
impossible to drive, and I with no depth perception,
pulled into a drive I thought was the casino
we wanted, Circus Circus? Is it called? Fear and Loathing
indeed, we ended up in an RV lot, the Big Kahuna, Extreme
Roadster, Vacation Maestro, big and endless,
row after row, we were lost, we were lost

and before that we were lost, the chapel, tipsy
female minister, warned you not to cleave
to any other, cleave to me, just to me cleave, and before
that the courthouse? license bureau? (why don’t I
know?), marble floors, long lines, some women in white
gowns, others in skimpy things, mascara running, running,
all of us running away from something and toward
something new, I ran toward the mountain

the mountain, we were coming to the mountain,
but before that was the crunching, the brakes
failing just outside of San Francisco, one last turn,
one last hill, and there was no stopping us, we slid
into a ma-and pop station, Middle Eastern family,
they were just closing shop, but the wife, she convinced
him to pity us, she gave us chips and coke, and that
was the last of the traveler’s cheques, so we drove

through night and day and one and a half states to get
to the mountain, our job security. Fourteen dollars in change
scraped from beneath our seats, between the seats, the cushions,
the boxes, the glove compartment, thirty cents left
to our names after the fourteen dollars in change
to camp for the night, tomorrow our housing at the bottom
of the mountain would be waiting for us, our jobs at the top
would be waiting too. Our housing, an RV, The Adventurer, our first
home, the ceiling hanging just above our heads, sitting on our bed
but before that, we set up camp, ate military rations, I went
to the bathroom and cut my red-dyed hair; a fresh
start, a new home, a new mountain, a husband, a new
job, secretly married, disguised, you with black hair
and a goatee, me with red, and the next day, we arrived

at the top of the mountain, the bottom of the glacier,
Paradise Lodge, and our nametags were not ready,
so you became Rocky and I, Rita. A whole new life.
Later, when the Michael tag came, I dyed my hair
black and became Rocky and remained Rocky
for the duration of the job, waiting for the Lydia tag, waiting
tables at the top of the mountain, Paradise Lodge, WA.

Days off, we hiked the trails around and up and down
the mountain, getting ready for the big hike at the end
of the season, at the end of our jobs. We weren’t ready,
far from ready at the end of October, snow starts to fall
on the mountain, the rivers bulge and carry away the bridges,
or they are taken down before they are broken by the ice,
bear boxes are removed from the camps, Rangers
are few and far between, so we pack packs too packed,

but before the mountain, before the Wonderland trail, before
the disaster, was Seattle, not yet gray, summer lingering
after morning fogs. A hostel on the Sound, fish and chips,
mountains surrounding the city on clear days, and a sense
of wanting home, an apartment with cats. Our legs grow weak.

We lose our ready muscles, pack our packs for two weeks around
the mountain, with no food drops, all food on our backs. It was too heavy
I told you. You told me we needed it all. It was too heavy I told you,
but we went back to the mountain to hike the hike we’d waited for,
late October, too late, too heavy, hiking up a barren trail, we passed
one hiker, one hiker on his way back to the exit point, and then solitude,
and then a river to forge. I fell in the river, the mountain went up,

the trail went steeper, the sleet began to sting
our cheeks and my knees began to ache, my legs began
to numb, dark chasing us up the mountain, the mountain, we collapse
at camp and dark falls on us. In the tent, we cry, wet, sore, tired, frozen.
I tried to touch you through our bags. We just slipped off each other,
pathetic slugs trying to connect. In the morning, the tent filled with water,
rain pouring down, we went back down the mountain, down to the exit point, the ranger station, our car, our home, our car

but before the river, the hiker. He took our picture beside the river, smiling after a light lunch, half way to camp, feeling we might make it, might just make it.
Cleave

A moment ago, your saliva
mixed with mine, your nails
scraped a piece of my skin and I
bit down to taste
the sweat on your neck.

We were one deity, split
male and female, cleaving
at the hip, creating
a world in our own flesh,
our one flesh.

And now I rest on my side
of the bed and am momentarily
annoyed to see your pillow
overlapping mine.
Thinking of Another While Making Tea

I hover near the warming stove, mitt-enveloped hand ready.
Slowly, the kettle begins to hiss, steam twisting slowly, flashing my face, making me sweat. The coil’s red hot now under the weight of the shimmying kettle, shaking, panting, the kettle finally screams, whistle-top blowing off, droplets drenching the silver surface.
I carry the hot body to the tea tray where the pot waits open-mouthed, infusion basket filled with musty smelling leaves. I pour the scalding water into the mouth, watch the leaves flesh out in the heat, thin green tongues touching.
Winter Light

Eczema in my elbow pits
spreading, on my neck, around my eyes, behind
my knees: Small red flakes of skin
cracking.

As the day crawls out of night
I search the naked landscape.

I keep waiting, writing,
wool sweater scratching my neck.
The shadows shift, the gray remains the same.
The guttural yowls of cats in the alley,
cans clacking, scraping the gravel,
compete with my typing.

The ground is brown, the sky a dirty white—
a cloud of chalk dust. The cold
dry room tightens
my crow’s feet, my jaw follows,
gripping nothing, my knuckles
split and bleed.

I write black
on white, to deny the gray. Snow
will not bring light
to mind, only to the eye.

Night comes on, light falls
away. My raw neck,
my pink hands prove
that I kept going.

We climb into our red bed,
and you kiss my neck,
my arms, behind my knees, my eyes,
take my poetry inside,
flushed and generous, wrap
my weighty limbs
around the corners of your body,
and clothe yourself in my warmth.
I give you this:
my substance in return for light.
Why I Put You in My Poems

To keep you,
though I know the you I try to keep
is not the you I have and I am
not the self that is keeping-- The self
on a mountain, newly paired to you,
laying white linen on tables, glaciers
peeking through the fog on the mountain
peak in the window. There is something
in white linen and salt shakers that calls
me. Something in the rush of tourists
at the door that thrills me in my black
pants, white shirt, and red lips. You bought
me three shades of red lipstick
on your day off, and so I loved you.

I wish that mountain to me. I wish
tables to set, shakers to fill, trays balanced
gingerly above my tiny body, brimming
with blackberry pies and mulberry ice cream.
I wish a rush of people to bring me
alive and fog to chill my neck. I wish
the marmots whistling our future
in a field of bent trees and ducking firerods.
We will pose again in front of a reflection
of a glacier in a lake, still, smiling
in our sunglasses and newness.

I wish a camper to make love in,
ceiling hanging by our heads, sleeping
bags sliding, twisting together, I wish
to scream my love in a small trailer park
at the bottom of a mountain looming
in our mornings. I wish to wake in dark
fog to fill the salt shakers and smooth
the white linen, and feel the shadow
of the mountain behind me.
Librarian Love Songs

I.

Gypsy librarians, when we travel
we fill the hatchback with books
that we may need
at any moment. I take

my father’s den with me wherever I go.

I wonder if anyone peered into our car
and thought, “Those two are about to get married
in Vegas.” Could they tell afterward, when the pressure
of being your dream girl had settled
into my neck?

II.

In Seattle, Amy said scotch tastes like cobwebs.
Drinking cobwebs could strangle you
from the inside with sticky thread, until you are just
a hard candy shell.

Brittle happens three years after grief
when you meet your future husband and want
to tell him he reminds you of your father
who was murdered by cobwebs,
but you have trouble swallowing.

III.

I wipe my shoes on the coarse coconut mat
we dragged up three flights only to find
it doesn’t fit the entryway and I notice
it is too big for a welcome mat
outside, too. It sits shedding,
jammed between our peacoats
and boots. I dream of sofas
more than a person should.
Our apartment is empty  
but our built-in book shelves  
are overflowing, an endlessly erupting  
vulcano of potential teasing us  
with its steam. You need  
this too, though  

you never met my father,  
ever sat on the gold carpet, in orange  
light, searching the shelves,  
title after title.
Sex Poem

It could go two ways. I could write about fucking (it’s always fun to say *fuck* in a poem) or I could write a sweet scene. Kissing versus biting? Or a little of both? After all, there is a little fuck even in the sweetest sex.

What I would not include is the conversation we had about raising our boys and how at one point I wanted to slap you and at another I wanted you and how all this led to vicious, sweet love-making.

I would not include the baby crying at my climax, me needing to nurse him back to sleep, while you rolled into your own solitary slumber, and how afterward I left you there in bed and got myself a beer, sat alone on the couch a room away from you and from our children, drinking that beer, naked and comfortable.
Memory, Without Teeth

My son admires the panoramic photograph above the mantle: Mount Rainier in a field of clouds, Hood and Helen surfacing in the background. He thinks it is the ocean; all the rolling clouds--waves; peaks--crests of waves, foamy and soft to his eyes.

I remember the mountaintop, all wildflowers, purple and white beneath the fog, dwarfed trees and the glaciers creaking in the summer heat, the peak white and sharp.

The new baby has arrived in mountains of a lower order—Appalachian foothills, injured by time, worn small and rolling. He gnaws my finger, his teeth coming, small sharp mountains growing on time-lapse film.

When I am an old woman maybe I will move back to the mountain, the bright white peak playing hide-n-seek in the fog, poking through the gray, enough. I will sit at the window, stare out at the sky, the clouds circling the summit, listen to the drip of snow melting. I will remove my dentures and gnaw my knuckles, until I feel the bone.
Navel Song
My Husband Doesn’t Like It When I Write poems about myself. He prefers when I use second or third person, giving instructions, ruminating on life’s generalities. But the specifics are what get me, always. My own hands writing in the dim light, chasing my own shadow, my own feelings pouring out all over the place, embarrassing and sloppy and so feminine. I cannot help confessing all the time. I fear death, so death comes up a lot. A coffin, my father in a green Hawaiian shirt, two cigars in his breast pocket waiting for a light, his fingers oddly flattened, stomach facing in, face the wrong color.

And our children (now I’m really risking getting sentimental), both cut from my womb for lack of room. Myself, splayed on a table unable to move anything but my head, greeting them each in turn with a hazy upside down grin, an upside down world to enter. I welcome them with open arms that cannot hold them, feel drugged and distant, disappointed at my lack of agency in their cold removals, my lack of closure, of closeness.

The distancing continues in the growing, the feeding. What should be bonding is storage; I cannot cuddle with a breastpump. I cannot play legos with a three-year old and pump, and cook, and study, and write
about anything but this,
this life, this reality, this physicality
these fingers chasing letters,
chasing children, chasing the dead,
keeping up with my husband,

the first face both my children
ever saw. How does that make him
feel? To look into the blinking gray
blue eyes of a new human,
wrinkled brow figuring out this bright
glaring world and settling
on one face,
his face,
not my face?
Possession

I stay up late to pump
my breasts. There is never enough
milk, never enough time. Tomorrow
I will walk away from his face,
leave behind my little vessel of self,
with attached nipple.
I will pretend
to live my own life, until

some pink vision of toothless mouth
and clear gray eye flashes through
me, the hot faucets turn, milk
tingles down, a quick dark
stain to remind me
whose I am.
The Pacifier

In your sleep, here on my chest, you twist
your face into a cry—the pout no one will believe
when you are four, bottom lip curling out perfectly,
corners turned down, the stick face drawing
of sad—before your eyes open,
I plug your mouth with a rubber nipple, *The Pacifier*—
aptly named super-prop of parents—
like *The Equalizer* I used to watch on TV
with my mother, with his suave English accent
and trench coat, at night he hit the streets
and gave the bad guys what was coming to them—
death, mainly.

*The Pacifier* jumps into dark
toothless nights and fills the longing
of the tongue, distracts you
from whatever it was that turned your face
into a caricature of a crying baby,
gives you something you want of all the world—

a supple sucking.  Holding starts
inside your spacious glistening mouth—
a soft warm space for knowing,
not unlike the place
where I first knew you.
Cycling

Welcome back to the world
of cramping, nausea, bloating, crankiness.
You remember the drill.
After the baby was born, you were given
reprieve, after that bleeding,
a cessation. Blessed baby and blessed nursing
spared you for a bit,
but you’d hoped for more time.

The first son nursed as if he could feel the network
of milk capillaries cinching away from his lips, he nursed
hard and long and demanded the milk
and the cycle waited over a year.

This one takes the breast
for granted, nibbles, grunts, stops
to chuckle, twist, stroke
your side gently, tear your chest, grab
your glasses. He’s always distracted,
seems to love the big people food.
Pumping gave you freedom to pretend
to live an adult life out there
in the giant world, the world of giants.

So here it is,
the bleeding and pain have returned
but you must not get cranky the next time
you nurse, spare the innocent.
So when the older son abruptly opens the door,
sticks his round face in, catches you
fiddling with the bloody thing,
asks (shock, horror, fear in his round
brown globes) ew, what’s that?
you explain that grown-up girls bleed
sometimes. Feeling this is not sufficient,
you continue, We bleed when we don’t have babies
in our tummies. Now the baby is out,
Mommy has to bleed.
It makes some kind of sense, this punishment, to him. He closes the door and leaves you to your mess, the pain growing in your abdomen, your lack bright red, staring you in the face.
Goddess

I am sitting next to a painting entitled “Milk Goddess;” a blue woman with horns on her head, surrounded by eyes cradles a black bird in both hands, across her chest, which is being squeezed by the pressure of her arms and milk is squirting from her light nipples to a milk reservoir beneath her. Being a milk goddess, myself, I take issue with the image. When my first son was born by cesarean section, after twenty-two hours of labor, my breasts were befuddled; refused to give into his little sucking mouth. They held their milk, locked it in, swelled with pride, growing sore and hot and red my nipples bled as my son tried to gnaw the food from them. I did not notice the blood, the pain, until I attached the industrial woman pump and watched my nipples take on a life of their own, pulsating in and out while little trickles of pink milk collected in the bottles. During the night,

I attached a small plastic tube to my nipple with surgical tape. The tube attached to a syringe filled with formula. The task was to attach his small toothless mouth, lips flayed perfectly, to both little tube and cracked nipple. He was too smart, always grabbed the tube and ignored the scabby nipple.

Eventually it came, the golden milk, and my son drank and grew. It takes work to be a goddess. We do not sit in the heavens surrounded by milky clouds, easily spewing forth the milk of life. We squeeze and cajole and bleed and trick our babies into wanting it. We make them work for it too, spreading their little lips just right, leading them in the right direction, though they will maim us. This is why a goddess will never receive the adoration enjoyed by the leisure class of gods.
We are not idle, and not even close to leisurely. We follow our brood closely, hands hovering always above them, as they eat and sleep and begin to walk away.
Counting Sheep and Mothers

I enter you when you sleep, crawl
up your tiny flared nostril, creep
into your baby brain and insinuate myself
into your dreams of cotton ball sheep, clean round
pigs, clowns and puppy dog tails,
dancing frogs and winking moons.
When you dream of milk, I am there.
When you dream of bananas, I am there.
When you dream of bright smiling faces,
twinkle lights and mini-blinds, I
am there. When you dream of the dark
place, liquid and warm, pulsating I am
there. I need you
to want me even
in your sleep.

In the morning, I will change
you and feed you and stroke you
and then I will need to leave,
counting on my dream self
to live in your tiny fist
of memory.
Creator

I started out believing God the father
I never quite had
the way I wanted, but parents can
not love their children.

Yesterday the radio said a mother
put her one-month old baby in the microwave,
killed her on the inside.
God is not a mother,

though I felt for a while I understood
her this way, being a mother, having fallen
in love with my sons, lacking them
who are now outside of me.

God is a baby-child.
He loves me because I made him,
just as my baby boys love and need me now,
a visceral, physical want,
always outside the womb. No matter what I do,
how tired I am, how many times I do not come
when they cry, as soon as they cry, no matter
how often I need to say I’m sorry,
my babies love me
absolutely, without question.

Part of them thinks we came into being
simultaneously, that no heart beat before their hearts,
but an older part of them tells them I
was here first,
I made them and I deserve
to be worshipped.
Navel Song

In her womb she held a snake, coiled and resting,  
    rattle-tail twitching at that moment  
    in dreams when snakes fall.

She touched her hand to her navel.

In her womb she held a poem, a secret poem  
    with sharp edges like metal  
    that grew and grew inside her.  
In her womb she held a dead thing, weighing  
    her down.  
In her womb she held a gun, just in case.  
In her womb she held a book of history forgotten,  
    history untold, history never  
    to resurface.  
In her womb she held a snake writhing upward.

She touched her hand to her navel  
    and breathed hard.

In her womb she held a child that wiggled  
    and tickled inside her.  
In her womb she held a sun, cauterizing  
    the night, burning bright.  
In her womb she held seven wonders and seven  
    evils, constantly fighting.  
In her womb she held a world, spinning  
    and breaking inside her.  
In her womb she held a snake, coiling around  
    her, squeezing tight.

She touched her hand to her navel  
    and pushed down.
In her womb she held her father, shrunken
   and smiling, poking her belly
   with the tip of his pipe.
In her womb she held her lover, curled up
   with no place to put his penis.
In her womb she held a phantom, angry and red,
In her womb she held your fear, dark and empty.
In her womb she held a snake, hissing
   up her spine.

She touched her hand to her navel
   and laughed.

She touched her hand to her navel
   and cried.
John Tells Helen How It Is
I’m Thinking Chinese

I know the woman who just exited
the restroom and I wonder, as she looks me
in the eyes, if she knows I know
her or if she knows she knows
me? Her eyes are clear, focused. Do I see recognition
there? Ten years ago she lived down the hall
from me, in the Hillcrest,
and whenever she opened her door
a cloud of sweet smoke followed, her eyes
always bloodshot, never quite focused.

At China Fortune the other day,
I ate an entire meal with a man
sitting at a table to my left, a man
I never even noticed, let alone recognized.
When he finished eating, he came
to my table. I saw him coming,
thought he should be passing,
was surprised when he stopped
by my chair and addressed me by name.

The thing is, it’s not like I see his face
and know I know it. I don’t know his face
at all, let alone his name. He belongs
nowhere in my personal puzzle
of memory. His head does not resemble
the shape of a missing piece.
So I smile, ask how he is and then
go on eating as he leaves.

Next time, he will fit into a space in a puzzle
called Chinese Food and I will think, I know him.
I’m thinking Chinese. Did we work together
in that Chinese restaurant (what was its name)?
But I won’t ask him. I will smile
and say how long it’s been and hope
he drops a name for me to hold onto.
So, the woman down the street, she’s got five, maybe six kids, two of them not even school age, and she’s alone too. Who knows where the father is, if there’s just one father right? She struggles. I mean, I feel for her, you know? I can see it in her eyes when she’s packing all those rugrats into that ratty minivan, keeping track of lunchboxes, blankies and bottles, snapping seatbelts and car seats, just trying to get anywhere on time, and she works long hours, and I know she doesn’t get much for it. She’s been having garage sales, yard sales, bake sales, sending the older kids out to mow lawns, rake leaves, shovel snow, you know? But when they’re all loading up that minivan, kids shuffling underfoot, snotty noses here, teary eyes there, and all that noise, whining, crying, arguing—that’s when I see she’s on the brink. Panic--that’s the look, like a grease fire just started in the pan and she is just shocked still in front of it not sure what to grab for, swallowing the immediate urge to throw the pan down. Her eyes are swallowing. So it wasn’t entirely a surprise when the sirens came. I’ve heard yelling there before, and other things. They say she dropped the little one, maybe she threw him, but she doesn’t think she did. He’s in the hospital, she is too, you know? They’re investigating. Kids taken to different foster homes. I saw them come filing out of that old drooping house, down the worn stairs, past all the push toys in the yard. Those kids walked out single file, neat and quiet as mice. Poor woman. I think she just didn’t know what to do with the fire, so she threw it down.
Captain of the Ship

You have a nice garden,
a good grill and good grilling technique.
You enjoy watching football on your HDTV,

but, somewhere a crocodile is ticking
and water is licking your heels.

Tell your wife
you’re bored. Explain:
as a child you dreamed of becoming a pirate
(A pirate? No one can become a pirate.)
Tell her, she’s missing the point.
You need to buy a convertible
or a motorcycle, to grab life
by its horns (Its horns? Honey.)

She’ll ask you to shave
your beard (It’s too scratchy) Don’t give in;
let your inner pirate bloom.
You may as well tell her
you want more sex,
that she never seems to get into it
like she used to. (Don’t wait
for the response; you won’t like it).
Jump in, tell her maybe the two of you
should get away, go to a dude ranch (A dude ranch?)
Then maybe you should just go by yourself.

Tell her the thing is you just need to feel
like a man (But you are a man).
Tell her you need to be master
of something.

Because you knew as a boy,
playing pirate, tying little Jenny to the hull
of the front porch, you knew these were the roles
you were meant to play and you just want
your goddamned treasure now.
For Nick, Preschool Room 3B

Too large for a two-year old,  
or three-year old for that matter, too big  
to control. She cannot stand you  
here, in her classroom. You’re dangerous,  
wild, big. You grunt, kick, scream and you  
have power in your size. Too big  
to act this way. Too big  
for diapers and accidents. Too big.

Poor big boy, scared brown eyes,  
crazed red hair.  
I need to tell you I’m on your side.  
You can handle it. Time  
is what you need.

One day, she’d had enough of your shit  
in the pants, your solid thighs covered  
in brown, new pink flesh stinking underneath,  
your pants around your ankles, she took you  
down the long hall to the office.

They should have fired her then. They should have  
removed her from the building; someone  
should have held you gently,  
wiped you clean and clothed you.

I’m depending here on a child’s lack  
of memory to save you,  
me. Surely, if you remember,  
the tiny you will die, shrink  
and hide, while the plump white you,  
the big boy (however clumsy, blushing, awkward)  
will be pushed into sports  
and other things.
Maeve

My cat has yellow ears. Her bones
stick out from her haunches. A tortoiseshell who usually
takes up room, weighs down my legs. A shell.

At the vet, my son is restless, trying hard
not to hear what a four year old can hear
in the tone of the vet’s voice.
When its time to leave, he sits sternly,
keeping her alive with his stubbornness.

Later today I may need to explain
to my four year old son that Maeve—
his kitty, who lets him carry her from room
to room in his tight arms, who nuzzled
him whenever, as a baby, he would cry—
this Maeve may need to sleep forever.

We rent, so there will be no memorial to Maeve
except that absence of weight
in my small son’s arms as he wanders the house
looking for someone to shepherd.
Tiny

At dusk, the little gods come tripping out
from behind whatever small appliance
(gear, cog, windmill, wind-up toy)
their small hands have been working,
winding, grinding, pushing carefully. The tiny door-hinge
goddess, tired from squeaking, comes down
to rest, locks the door for the night.

They look so fragile among the big people stuff;
twenty-two fit on one Lay-Z-Boy, reclining
collectively to push the back down.
Before sleep, the younger gods switch positions.
She tries to heat the toaster
while he tries in vain to work a tube of red lipstick,
smushing the tip so it will never go on evenly again.

The most courageous of the younger gods venture
through the crack under the door to see the big world.
They turn their faces into the wind
of a large god’s breath. Their feet lose hold, fly
up behind them; the little gods flitter like dry leaves
down the pavement, rolling, bumping their tiny shins, funny
bones, foreheads. They grab at twigs,
fire hydrants, gum wrappers. One lucky little god
sticks his head in a wad of old gum
and sticks it out, upside down, his hair pulling
at the roots. Eventually the wind dies down
and he rests. There are no small gods up the street
and none down the street. His head will not break
free, so he closes world-weary eyes.

He dreams he is at the edge of the well
the big gods drink from, peering
into the black depths. One by one
he drops in pennies the size of his head.
His tiny godly wishes splash
in the dark water below.
Yes, tiny god, wake from your dream.
Join the miniature procession of morning’s work.
Chant your own praise, since most of us know nothing
of your tiny hands turning tiny gears to break
the dawn, flaming here over our mutual smallness.
Friday, 1 am: *Horror* (93 mins)

Why are the *Sorority Babes* in the *Slimeball Bowl-a-Rama*? And how is it that bowling began some domino effect leading to this severed head bumping down the gutter?

Did Amanda finally tell Tammy what she *really* thinks of her *Pink Bombshell* lipstick? Or did Amanda stare a little too long at the hard round ass of Tammy’s boyfriend, Tad?

Poor Tad’s head is now rolling past the bowling pins into that dark mouth and Amanda’s macaroon breasts are splattered with his blood, while Tammy bends (back scooped so her short shorts reveal a curve of possibility) and picks the fire-hatchet up one more time, evil glint in her lined eye.

What can poor Amanda do? Her sisters all hacked, severed, and stored in various nooks and crannies of the bowl-a-rama. Bridget’s body under the bar, twisted atop the fat bartender (he never could have dreamed such luck, in life), his dead-wide eyes mimic his would-be delight. Poor Carrie got it in the shower room. Someone had to

and she had tits *and* ass, so she was doomed, Fred (thrilled to finally see his fantasy unwrapped) thrashed in the corner—always the voyeur, never the…

The whole place is a mess, beyond hope of ever cleaning. But when Mrs. Finkham comes in the morning to clean for league night, she will sigh, roll up her gray sleeves and sweep the heads,
blond and buoyant, past the bar, the vending area
(perhaps stop to get a Bit-O-Honey),
and give one last shove
out the back door, to the dumpster,

filled with Thursday’s Hell-bent Hookers, teased
bouffants and fishnets tangled now
with Alpha Gamma Delta sweaters
and pure blonde shine.
John Tells Helen How It Is.

At a nearby table, a man talks to a woman about what is missing in poetry. She is a poet; he, a fiction writer, and young, sure of his conclusions. He leaves no room. A poem is shorter. Period. An author cannot fit as much in, so less can be taken out. It seems logical. They are playing chess and his linear mind just might win. He follows each move with its probable counter in his mind, a line to an inevitable end with no detours that cannot be mapped in the same manner. This is why when he looks at a lake in a poem, he knows that lake. He takes in the reflection of the moon and appreciates its beauty for what its worth, and turns away. He has seen it all before. Thought it himself, even.

He never stops to breathe in the damp and certainly never dips his hand into the doubled moon to stroke the strange fish with iridescent fins and blind eyes that glow so that others may see. Just as well. They would probably bite him, mistake his fingertip for a little vienna sausage easily removed from a hook, spit the little nail out and let it drift slowly down from the surface moonlight to the silt and snails deep below, the lost shoes and tin cans and this thin layer of translucence.
That Moths Are Not Alone
Mahler in Marietta

*Do you know the children's tune "Are you sleeping? Are you sleeping? Brother John, Brother John"? This movement uses that melody but then transforms it into the minor... The main picture he had in mind when he composed this was that of a little procession of animals mourning the death of a beloved hunter.* --Derek Lim, Review in *The Flying Inkpot.*

The third movement of Mahler’s first symphony begins as the car rounds the bend at the bottom of a particularly large foothill: an eerie funereal Frére Jacques. The town rises up out of the dense sleet, the sky near black, sleek and solid behind the little glowing golden city of Marietta.

The third movement of Mahler’s first symphony, striking among the regular ups and downs of major chords, Frére Jacques in a minor key. It’s difficult to recognize at first. I can almost see, between the dilapidated Victorian homes snugly fitted together, Mahler’s imagined woodland procession twisting down from the same tree covered foothills I am descending now:

A double-bass solo over a single tympani leads chipmunks in mourning, followed by the rabbits, heads bowed, pheasants circling above, ducks and geese in solemn Vs, and laid tactfully across the backs of two pall-bearing bucks, faces appropriately austere, is the bright orange-vested hunter, eyes closed, face still, gun across his chest. Why do they mourn, Gustav?

And then the orchestra joins in the childish tune, a moment of sun breaking through the black hills, across the hunter’s face, an orange glow brightening his cheeks, radiating to encompass Marietta, Ohio—a mute and burning god.
His Own Personal Light-Up Jesus

My son recently discovered Jesus. He finally asked who it was hanging on the crucifixes above all our beds. Jesus. Would my mother die. “Are jesus’ foots bleedin’?” “Yes.” “And is his head bleedin’?” “Yes.” “And is the other jesus’ foots bleedin’?” meaning the bronze crucifix that was my grandfather’s, my favorite, the only one with value, that hangs by his bed, because his is the most important of the beds to me. But he wants the biggest, goriest crucifix (angel, he calls it when he forgets the name) that hangs to the left of a dreamcatcher above our bed and to the right of Legba, The Great Voodoo Intercessor, on our dresser (monster, he says, and does not know the name). I find their peaceable coexistence in our room satisfying, though my mother would weep at the irreverence. Luckily, a friend, sensing a three year old’s budding religiosity, gave my boy a Jesus night-light and solved the dilemma. Apparently, light beats gore.
Over

After listening to the day’s itinerary,
my four-year old son looked me face-on:
“Someday I will be as big as you.” (soon,
boy, soon). “When I am that big,
I will be able to drive the car,
and when I can drive the car, I will
drive myself to the playground.”

How I wish this were true. I imagine
his bright child face shining through
the scruff and pimples of adolescence,
his newly gangly legs stretched
long from a swing, torso tilting back, rough
chin tipped to the sky—all he can see
is blue and white and all he can feel
is the glorious dizziness that comes
from falling into the sky
over and
over.
Yes

My orchids glare at me
in their wide-open beauty, questioning
what I am doing here at this desk
with nothing to say.
The room is muggy. My desk faces
the window, which faces the screened-in porch,
though just now, the blinds are closed. It is dark.

This is the largest room in our new apartment,
large enough to allow grand ideas, schemes,
poems? But today is one
of those days, you know
those days. My son would not go
to sleep for over an hour.
He said “no” or burst into tears
at every turn today. I kept saying
“no” and my husband kept
saying “no”. No you cannot climb that.
No you may not eat that. No we cannot
buy that. No, it is time to sleep, eat, rest, clean.
No was everywhere today. I am shrouded
in no. It is claustrophobic.
How can I let anything out, with so much
no in the air. No wonder
my son begins to scream and hit
after so much of it. It’s stifling.

These are the demons, I suppose,
that will make it hard for him to write
a poem some day in the future. Each new
word followed by an inner no. Innovation
just hiding behind a curtain of nos.
He will pick his pen up and put
it down. He will pick his pen up
and put it down. Until he has to close
the book. Let tomorrow be a yes
day. Let that day reach his future, let him
pick his pen up and put *it* down,
some word, some marvelous made-up
word that captures it all,
his life, my life, the poetry
that is dying
to come out.
That Moths Are not Alone

100 tons of fireworks explode
in a working class housing estate

The fire draws out the neighbors. The most
magnificent display ever seen plays the night
sky above their homes. Not content
to gaze at beauty from a distance,
they venture to the source,
down the streets, eyes and mouths
wide with wonder at the light
anemones, pink, blue,
green, ah!, white!

Unable to quench their need
for light, they keep walking
forward to a ball
of flame so bright so bright.

Imagine that last brilliant moment
when they themselves, with amazed
gasp, become the light,
bright, so bright.
Preparation

I had forgotten this little bathroom in the vestibule to St. Joe’s, the narrow rectangular window, long like a volume in a wooden bookcase, tilts out to the rain, allowing the city street smell of gasoline, diesel, the cry of brakes, pounding classic rock, and puddles dispersing, to seep into this closet-privy, same marble floor as the vestibule, wooden walls slanting in on my tiny body on the toilet; the little old sink on its one white leg, the metallic mirror above I never used to be able to see myself in. Of all the lofty crevices with saints staring down from windows, from painted ceilings, why in this little bathroom do I suddenly feel like a small child again, waiting for the bustle of parishioners to calm down, breathing heavy, relishing the private space? Here in this box-room, the window tipped, I breathe in the rain and fumes and feel safe. My grandmother lay in the sanctuary under a picture of herself I never knew. My aunt, uncle, cousins greet relatives I do not know, accept their sympathies, tell stories of my grandmother’s fictitious life: the girl-scout leader model mother, the believer, the loving wife, not the woman who could lift a couch, the woman who told pope jokes, the woman who held grudges for years, the woman who wished she had been born a boy so she could play football. While I hide in the restroom, quiet, I close my eyes, imagine straightening my white dress, adjusting my veil, preparing my tongue for its first taste of God.
red permed hair, frizzy on her head, 
too much rouge and lipstick, 
big glasses perched on a big nose 
(she never thought she was pretty anyway) 
sitting in a gold velour wing-backed chair, worn 
from cats and dogs rubbing a streak of brown 
across the bottom.

She’s watching late night TV and carrying on 
some conversation with us about city politics 
or high school football, 
or her kidneys or toenails, 
laughing loudly often, and the Australian sheep dog 
--hyper as ever—paws her knee 
and she keeps shoving it away 
nonchalantly, talking, seemingly oblivious 
to the dog, until finally, 
she takes her Diet Pepsi can, 
crushes it in one strong hand, 
and pitches it at the dog’s head, 
“God damn it, Tally, shut up!”

The dog whimpers away and my grandmother 
comments on something David Letterman 
just said, laughs raucously. I turn 
to my boyfriend, his mouth agape not knowing 
how to react, and remember that he did not know 
the definition of a certain word I used 
earlier in the day. I whisper,

“That’s volatile.” And now whenever 
he encounters “volatile” on the page, 
he pictures my grandmother 
in this chair, with this dog, and that laugh 
and the quick change of her face 
from joy to anger to joy again. 
And so, though now she is dead 
and still, face unmoving, mouth 
quiet, she lives on in this word.
To Septimus, Upon Reading *Mrs. Dalloway* (After Being Diagnosed with Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome)

“… first that trees are alive; next there is no crime; next love, universal love, he muttered, gasping, trembling, painfully drawing out these profound truths which needed, so deep were they, so difficult, an immense effort to speak out, but the world was entirely changed by them forever.” –Septimus Smith, *Mrs. Dalloway*, Virginia Woolf

I hear the trees sometimes.  
they whisper in green voices,  
a rasping, reedy sound,  
to each other, to me.

I am not sure what they say.  
I always forget  
to write it down.

I know it means something  
to me. I know it is relevant.  
But I let it slip away like autumn.

I have no right to share  
your disease, I have not seen  
atrocities, just one  
normal death  
rattle, one mundane exhale—  
a trickle of blood—one indefinite  
stare, one warm leg,  
one cold leg, the smell  
of soiled sheets I mistook  
for the smell of blood.

I kissed the mouth before  
it bled. I know  
the nightmares that cause  
neck injuries  
from anxious wakings.  
I know the fear  
of what lay in wait  
behind this bush,  
over that hill,
in the trees, everywhere
waiting.

I know it all from this one
death, of just one father.

You were braver than I,
you dangerous poet, wounded
man. To listen, to believe,
to write it down, to watch

your friend die and live
to hear him again. They speak,
the dead, in black voices,
a desperate, needy sound,
to each other, to me, to you.

We live. We should listen
to the trees and let corpses
confer with themselves,
lest they lure us away
on an autumn breeze.
Write to Live

Today, I cannot seem to jump
into anyone’s mind, sitting here,
sipping coffee, watching them
all. Countless heads with head-phones
and fingers tapping silently
on laptops. I may as well
be decoration. I keep looking,

listening. I hear a jingle
of ice on glass, someone stirring
a drink incessantly. I am transported
to my childhood, the clink
of Canadian Club over ice. That jingle
followed my grandmother
around the house, her own little theme song,
and that strong smell of whiskey
mingled with Chanel #5, a smell
uniquely hers, spicy and sweet
simultaneously.

Every time I contemplate
the living, some dead
figure raises its head, taps
my shoulder, guides my pen.
When will I exhaust death
with my writing, escape
and write to live?
What We Lose

I.
My mother, the painter, had a heart attack, quit smoking. Now she’s addicted to Popsicles. I haven’t seen a new painting in over a year.

My mother wakes --smoke curling through the morning until she can settle like dust on whatever painting she must begin.

She seeps through the paper like wetted cake watercolors, drips out the other side puddling into herself-- a glass vase taking shape from the blue-tinted water inside.

Now, she prays to saints, to Mary, to anyone who will help. She attends mass every morning, 8am and believes what I once wanted to believe.

II.
My father, the musician-philosopher, quit life early, liver swollen with a painful sense of justice.

In a gold den, under a red lightbulb, my father paints (drinks, smokes, listens) two orange circles overlapping gradations of orange-- burnt sienna burnt umber mixed with yellow. Inside each circle— a blue dot.

Are they eyes?
A minister friend claimed that on my father’s deathbed (the one I cleaned every day except that day) he prayed a prayer to Jesus the Savior--my father, the secular humanist addict. His ashes used to sit in an urn on his mother’s mantle--my grandmother, who answered a debt-collector’s call for her son: *He’s in an urn on the mantle, if you’d like me to get him for you?*

III.
I used to paint in my mother’s studio—cursing all day the oil or watercolor replicas of boring photographs. Where does art come from?

An unfinished watercolor of a white church in winter, obstructed by skeletal sycamore branches cutting the picture to pieces of glass, stained gradations of blue, white, shadows outlining the brightness.

My son draws in ink, but most often he writes a combination of real and imaginary letters. He calls it God’s language. And I believe him.
Rumble
Rumble

Suppose the stars pluckable. Pluck them one by one like plump grapes off a vine. Pluck until only the moon is left hanging, a solitary silver apple in a tangle of dark branches. Do you feel guilty for your gluttonous plucking, chewing, swallowing the stars, harboring them in your belly like bacteria growing to explode? Or is it indigestion? Guilt or simple stomach cramps in the stark light? I hear the stars rumbling while you eye the moon lustfully. I know you. You cannot hide your hunger. You would leave me here in absolute darkness just to sate the rumble in your gut.