Hope for the Best,
Prepare for the Worst

A thesis presented to
the faculty of
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In partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
Master of Arts

Carling E. Futvoye

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This thesis titled
Hope for the Best,
Prepare for the Worst

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ABSTRACT

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Hope for the Best, Prepare for the Worst is a collection of poems exhibiting the best creative work by Carling Futvoye. It addresses themes and issues sparingly talked about in poetry or real life. It is direct and sometimes vulgar, but depends on the vulgar diction to portray what it needs to. The introduction addresses the problematic comparison between the author and Sharon Olds, as well as Futvoye’s goals in earning her endings and her sometimes “shocking” descriptions of sex and violence. The goal is to make readers aware of their own uncomfortable feelings, while remaining on good terms with the author.

Approved: _____________________________________________________________

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INTRODUCTION

BEYOND GRATUITOUS:

THE GENUINE NEED FOR SHOCK VALUE

Everyone likes me. I say this unapologetically and unironically. People have always liked me. I know how to give people what they want. I know how to adapt to different social groups, to different hierarchies of people. I'm good at being conversational and charming, complimentary and cute, and, because of this, everyone likes me. Also because of this, I have a very specific function – to be likable and entertaining. While I relate my likeability to a skill, something I'm quite proud of and something that most people are incapable of, it does restrict me a bit. I'm not allowed to be anything but engaging and charming.

Aside from being likeable, I'm also insane. (What sane person believes that everyone likes her?) No one wants to see that darker side. Inside this small, adorable package are a lot of troubling thoughts. I over-analyze everything. I worry about everything. I go through life under the assumption that everything terrible that has happened to other people will one day probably happen to me. I want everything terrible that has happened to other people to happen to me. Why not me? I want to experience everything, and I try my hardest to, within my limits. I do questionable things for the stories, even if they put me in difficult situations. (I address this need to write from experience in my poem “Nothing Bad Happens to Me.” It expresses my frustration with
not being able to write about mundane experiences, while also longing for a moderate disaster to give me more material.)

My goal in my poetry is to portray these experiences I've had, these feelings I have, no matter how unflattering or unattractive they are. But I wish to do so in a charming manner. I assume everyone has the thoughts I do, correct assumption or not, and I want to talk about them. Let's talk about them.

Because of, or perhaps in spite of, my desire to experience and analyze, when I write, I am unable to not draw from personal experiences. Virtually every one of my poems has a dash of something that has really happened to me. Sure, exaggeration may occur (for instance, I have never owned a pair of Manolo Blahniks, nor have I ever hooked up with Jesus), but for the most part, I'm purely confessional. I have come to realize that my confessions aren't so sexy. I have come to terms with the fact that my brain turns to a lot of undesirable (and sometimes reprehensible) thoughts. I wish it didn't. I wish that I was ignorant and unaware of my feelings, but I'm not. So, all there is to do is write. I figure everyone feels at some point what I do, but, for one reason or another, chooses to ignore it. I want to tap into that. I want to tap into the things that people have thought about, but became frightened that they were thinking about it. I want to give acknowledgment to those feelings. I want to give that a voice.

But I still want people to like me. Therefore, I also write to entertain. I don't write for myself. I take that back. I write because I enjoy it, which is for myself. I crave the feeling I get when I finish a poem and I'm proud of it. But the feeling of pride comes from the feeling that others will like it. I love the feeling of finishing something that I think others will like, and that feeling doesn't diminish even when they don't like it. Even
feeling like they will like it gives me the urge to keep writing. It feeds into my love of being liked. I want people to appreciate the fact that I'm writing about things that no one else will (at least, no one else in the workshop). I want people to like me for my honesty. I'm proud of my honesty, even if it's brutal and unladylike.

So, I have two goals in my poetry: to be honest about things – to talk about thoughts that enter everyone's psyche, but most people are afraid to give meaning to or acknowledge– and to entertain people. In doing this, I can remain likeable. At least, that's the goal.

The first poem I ever read that did something that I wanted to do was James Wright's “Lying in a Hammock at William Duffy's Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota.” Before I knew anything about poetry (though I'm not claiming to know too much now) I knew this poem did something I liked. It surprised me. It takes a lot to surprise me. But the turn Wright makes in that last line is amazing to me. It evokes a sense of heartbreak and sympathy, as well as awe. I've read the poem many times since my first reading and still, every time, it gets me. “I have wasted my life” (line 13). Christ, what a startlingly truthful thing to say. It takes me out of the poem, but it's the end of the poem. I want to return once I have overcome the shock, but I can't, so I'm left there, alone, with it.

Why would he say such thing? After all of his charmingly rustic descriptions of his rural surroundings, and this is his last line? From the bronze butterfly to the black trunk to the green shadow to the empty house, Wright keeps things at a calm, steady pace. As Wright describes his view from his hammock, we think he's just peacefully taking in the view. Even the penultimate line “A chicken hawk floats over looking for home,” gives us no indication of the turn he's about to make (line 12). At this point, the
poem is just a series of almost predictable descriptions. But “I have wasted my life” changes the game. We have to go back and read the poem again. What do these descriptions have to do with the speaker wasting his life? The last line invites us to read the poem again and again. As we read again, we're with the speaker as he sits in his hammock, admiring what's around him, and we realize, everything has a purpose. The chicken hawk has a home to go to. Even the horse droppings “blaze up into golden stones.” What's the speaker's purpose? We're with him as he realizes that he has none, and that hits with a startling impact. I'm impressed with Wright's courage and audacity to give us such a bold ending move. I believe the reader knows this and respects him more for it, at least I do. We respect honesty in people.

So, I tried to do it. And I tried to do it again. I've tried many times, succeeding marginally and failing most of the time. I can't stop trying, though. I sometimes try too hard to make the endings of my poems have this sort of resonance. I'm not going necessarily for the surprise ending, but an ending that leaves my readers with an exhaled breath that they don't inhale for a tiny bit. It is one of the biggest criticisms of my poetry that I'm trying desperately to address. People say, “Carling, when you think you're finished with a poem, just write six or twelve lines more. See where it goes.” This is difficult for me. When I finish a poem, it's done. I work hard to get to those endings, and perhaps my poems feel a bit contrived as a result. But Wright's ending feels effortless. I want mine to feel that effortless. I think my poem “People Like Me” has an effortless feel. As it reads down the page, it's just an easygoing, positive description of things the speaker does and has that make people like her, then the ending hits hard: “But I've got to be honest./ 65 percent of the time/ I want to blow my brains out.” I don't think this
feels too forced or even predetermined, but it's still surprising and honest. Maybe I come close to Wright here.

Because of my endings like “I want to blow my brains out” and many other things (my depictions of violence, sex, my lack of regard for emotional consequences for the reader) my work has often been compared to that of Sharon Olds, by peers and mentors alike. I resent this accusation. I don't mind my work being described as “shocking” or “disturbing,” but I find Olds's “shocking” poems to be gratuitous, both in themselves, as well as in the sheer number of them. How many times can you write about bodies fitting together? Or your relationship with your parents? Or the genitalia of your children? How many times can you shock us in the same way before we just don't care anymore?

“The Promise” is one of Olds's more successful poems, in my eyes. Her language matches the tone. She portrays somewhat of a violent sexuality, a relationship between two people, without taking it over the top. It might be shocking to the timid reader (I wouldn’t know) with lines like “we are at it again, renewing our promise/to kill each other…” but it belongs there (lines 3-4). Even her depictions of sex here aren’t as vulgar as they other times are: “Think how we have floated together/ eye to eye, nipple to nipple,/ sex to sex, the halves of a creature/ drifting up to the lip of matter/ and over it…” (lines 27-31). This is a lovely description. It’s not abrasive or gross. It even kind of calms the hard-hitting premise of “The Promise” – the promise to kill each other, though it isn't killing in a murderous sense. It’s a sacrifice, almost. It’s a kill to save. It’s romantic. It’s almost nice. It has an edge to it, but it’s the right amount of sharpness. She walks the line well in this poem, but that can’t be said for most of them.
I feel that many of Olds’s poems, or images, descriptions, etc., don't serve a real purpose, don't have any real meaning beyond the violence or sex or the just plain grossness. One that really irks me is “The Pope's Penis”:

It hangs deep in his robes, a delicate clapper at the center of a bell.
It moves when he moves, a ghostly fish in a halo of silver seaweed, the hair swaying in the dimness and the heat – and at night, while his eyes sleep, it stands up in praise of God.

Now, I know she wrote this for the sole reason of getting under people's skin. It doesn't say anything about her religious beliefs, or about religion at all. It doesn't say anything about her relationship to the pope, to her relationship to anything, other than her need to gross people out. I feel like she sat down at her computer and thought, “What can I write about that will offend some people?” This angers me. I'm put off, but not in the way she wants me to be. I'm put off that she's wasting my time with a poem that says nothing, that speaks to nothing. I'm put off that my work is compared to this.

There's a difference between saying something simply to shock the reader and saying something shocking because it has a place in the poem. For instance, in the third section of my poem “Waitress,” I use the phrase “eating me out.” It's vulgar diction, but necessary for the poem. It begins:

Today, I'll serve his wife coffee.
I'll beg another server to take the table.
They'll ask why,
but I can't tell them it's because
I hadn't even showered since her husband spent the evening eating me out.
So I'll do it.
The situation the speaker is in is socially unacceptable. It's uncomfortable and inappropriate. Using “eating me out” amplifies the ugliness of the fact that the waitress is serving her lover's wife, who is unaware of her husband's affair. In contrast, another one of my poems that deals with oral sex, “An Evening with J.C.,” is much gentler than “Waitress.” The first stanza reads:

Hey Jesus, remember that time I was drunk and really upset and lying in a yard begging You to kill me because, shit, no one cares about me anyway, and instead of killing me, You gave me a ride home, took my upstairs, and went down on me for like an hour and a half? That was really cool of You.

This poem, addressing an awkward relationship with Jesus (the Jesus), shows Him being a caring person: taking the speaker home, giving her some loving, then making sure she stays warm and doesn't die. I chose to say “went down on me” because it is a gentler language -- a more acceptable, less shocking phrase. Besides, Jesus would never talk about oral sex in terms of eating out! “Went down on” almost sounds biblical, doesn't it?

Sarah Manguso also has a poem that I really love that does something along the lines of something I'd like to try:

Kitty in the Snow

Meanwhile I fuck this sculpture In my mind until it melts, then stop. Mmm, cold. At the party I talk to everyone's honey And sip poison and then go home, Get shitfaced, and get it on with myself. I'm so good, I give it to myself every bad way I know.
I whisper in my ear as I come:
Sarah Manguso, you're a damn fine lover.
Maybe someday we can be together, too.

Much of the time, I don't know what to do with Manguso's poetry. I find her tone confusing. Is she serious or patronizing? Is she trying to be witty? I honestly don't know, which is problematic. But the first time I read, “Kitty in the Snow” I connected immediately. It has a raw sexiness to it that somehow isn't shocking. Even the “fuck” in the first line doesn't pull you out of the poem, as many times that word will do. Most of the time, its use is excessive, even in my own poetry. I use it so often in my daily speech that I forget that it's inappropriate by many social standards, so it often finds its many of my poems. But “Kitty in the Snow” uses it well. It's almost sophisticated. Perhaps it's the fact that she's fucking a sculpture. Because she says sculpture, I picture the party to be at an art gallery, and everyone all dressed up, sipping champagne, while Sarah whispers into the ears of attractive men with wedding rings. Then, after all that, she goes home alone, and that's only 4 lines in. Then it gets kind of dirty, but we expect it to. Now she's going to get shitfaced, because she couldn't at the party, and she's going to rely on the only thing she has, herself. But does she even have that? The “too” in the very last line throws me, and I love it. It's as if she can connect to all the men at the party, to the sculpture, but hasn't quite figured out how to connect to herself.

I'm impressed with Manguso's ability, in just 10 lines, to interweave masturbation, loneliness, and disconnect from the self, with a touch of sophistication. I wish I could let go of my narrative nature just a bit to be able to write a poem that leaves questions, that has a more mystical quality to it, as Manguso’s does. I think I might come close to this in
“What keeps the metronome accurate?” This poem stands out among my other ones. I took a chance and deviated from what I know works. The narrative structure is looser; more questions remain. But I think it holds the same kind of tone as Manguso’s poem. It interweaves many elements that I hope can be a little vague and leave more room for interpretation. I don’t know if others read “Kitty in the Snow” the way I do, but that’s part of what I like about it.

Poetry gets me. I’m not sure if I get it yet, but I find something in it that I can’t find anywhere else. When I read a poem that excites me (even if it doesn’t necessarily do something I wish to do) I feel connected to something. I like poets that seem fearless in what they write. Few people are willing to take risks, in poetry or otherwise. Reading them helps me to become more fearless. When poets touch on things within myself that I try to ignore or mask, they make me feel like part of the bigger picture that I want to belong to. I want to give back to that picture. So I take risks. I risk losing readers. I risk offending my mother. I risk people knowing what I actually think about, who I actually am. My poems aren’t easy things to write. “How to Load a Shotgun,” for instance, was extremely difficult for me to write, and I feel I took a great confessional risk with that ending. I’d been struggling with the proper way to end it, and as soon as I wrote, “I’m tired of worrying about you,” I knew that was it, no matter what kind of person that line revealed me to be.

I want my poems to need their shocking points. I want them to feel like they’ll fall apart without them. Because beyond the shockingness, or sexiness, or violence, or uneasiness of my poems, is a substantial risk I’m taking. The risk isn’t always talking about “eating out” or hooking up; the risk lies in acknowledging the anxieties and
vulnerabilities that lies within me. It’s all I know to write about. I can’t lie. I'm absolutely genuine in all that I do. It's why people like me. It's what makes me a good poet.
WORKS CITED


HOPE FOR THE BEST,

PREPARE FOR THE WORST
Bad Things Don't Happen to Me

Sometimes, I wish I would accidentally get pregnant
so I could have an abortion.
Then, I would write poems about my abortion,
and the impact the abortion had on me,
and the politics behind abortion,
because abortion seems to be something people care about.
And rape -- people love to read about rape.
And abusive fathers.
And all the other things I don't have.

Why can't I write about last Sunday afternoon?
I took my dog to the park,
and I sat under a tree and read a book.
It was sunny, and I was excited
it was finally warm enough to wear my new sun dress.
I shared a smile with a stranger.
We had similar looking dogs,
but they did not want to be friends.
She said, “Oh well, Daisy doesn't like anyone.”
I said, “Neither does Truman,” and smiled.
And it was true, because Truman bit someone once
and had to be quarantined for 10 days,
but Truman didn't bite Daisy.
He didn't even look at her.
He laid his head in my lap and fell asleep in the sunlight.
His fur turned warm.
Beads of sweat formed delicately on my neck,
and I turned the pages.
An Evening With J.C.

Hey Jesus, remember that time I was drunk
and really upset and lying in a yard
begging you to kill me
because, shit, no one cares about me anyway,
and instead of killing me,
You gave me a ride home,
took me upstairs,
and went down on me for like an hour and a half?
That was really cool of You.

And even though I was too drunk to come
You kept trying, determined not to give up on me,
because You knew I didn't really want to die,
I just needed a little pleasure, a little love,
and when I fell asleep, You didn't get mad,
or offended like most men do.
You just found me a blanket and lay next to me,
making sure I didn't choke on my own vomit
while I was asleep.

I've been thinking about that night a lot, Jesus,
and I'd like to do it again sometime.
Sometime when I'm not drunk
so we can really enjoy ourselves.
I promise I, too, am good at oral sex
when I'm not covered in dirt and tears
and have way too much vodka running through my system.
But I'm worried You only like drunk, suicidal women,
because I gave You my phone number the next morning
and I haven't heard from You since.
If You don't like me, that's fine.
Just let me know.
I really hate waiting for people to call.
Fields Out Back

Maybe I'll come visit
and we can walk in the field out back
It will be morning and damp
and we will get grass stuck to our toes.
Maybe I'll clean off your feet
and grill you a hot dog.
You'll open up a bottle of chardonnay.
It will be afternoon and warm
and you will lay on my stomach.

Maybe I'll pretend I'm taking you somewhere special
and I'll blindfold you.
I'll drive around for a while,
and take you to an empty lot.
It will be evening and cloudy,
and I will bash your knee caps with a baseball bat.
I will let you find your way home.

Maybe I'll let you fall in love with me
and pretend not to notice.
It will be January and your car will be cold
and I will refuse to buckle my seatbelt
because I don't know how else to rebel.
Can't Get it Clean

I had a blister on my foot
that popped before I noticed it was there,
that was large, but painless, so I didn't hesitate
to take off my heels and march around in the dirt
like some fucking drunk.
And now, I can't get it clean.
I try so hard, and I can't get it clean.
I've soaked it for hours and scrubbed with soap,
I've tried picking out the dirt with safety pins and toothpicks
but it's hopeless.
The dirt mixed with blister discharge
and formed a layer of sediment
on top of my broken blister.
The dirt is embedded in my foot,
actually embedded, like
skin is beginning to regrow over this
hard layer of dirt.
Sometimes it bleeds, and
I'm sure it's about to get infected,
if it's not already
but I'm trying to ignore it,
I don't have time for this.
I have bigger problems in my life.
I have to go grocery shopping,
and clean the cat box, and
write a sympathy card to the parents
of an old friend
who killed himself last month.
I haven't talked to him in
a couple years, but I remember
he ruined the end of Enemy at the Gates for me.
He thought it would be funny.
Ed Harris dies in the end.
Jude Law shoots him in the face
point blank.
I'm reading death statistics.  
I do this sometimes when I've  
read too many obituaries  
about people dying before they're 30.  
I wonder if “unintentional injuries”  
(number five on the top ten list)  
includes car accidents.  
I don't think I have cancer yet,  
or heart disease.  
I wonder what “septicemia” is.  
It's number ten.  
I wonder if I have it.  

I wonder if my parents are going to die soon.  
I wonder if my mother's still taking her medication.  
I wonder if she's dating anyone new.  

She once dated a guy from Brazil.  
He was nice enough, I guess,  
had a big smile with weird teeth --  
the kind that make you wonder if  
they're real or not.  
He wanted me to like him,  
so he bought me dinner one night.  
When he dropped his napkin on the restaurant floor,  
he grazed my leg while picking it up.  
I wonder if it was an accident.
Who do you know?

I've never known anyone who's been kidnapped, and kept in a basement for weeks, sleeping on a yellow mattress and shitting in a bucket -- eating baby food and drinking rain water that leaks through cement - performing bizarre sex acts in front of a webcam until their captor shoots them in the forehead live.

I wonder what that phone call would be like. Or the interaction with the police man at your front door, by the tulips in the rock garden, as he gives you the website, making you identify her, promising they're doing all they can. Would you continue to watch? How could you not?

Once I knew someone who was dragged between train cars until his neck was broken and every conceivable body part was covered in blood -- mutilated and bruised, gravel and dirt embedded into his skin, missing hair and teeth and face. It was six miles before the sensors went off, and the conductor found him. He probably called for help. They both probably called for help.
Faking It

I don't know how many calories are in a shot of vodka. 
I feel like this is something I should know 
(along with the quadratic formula and my grandfather's phone number).

Vodka has always been a friend to me, and yet, 
I don't even know how many calories I'm ingesting. 
I do know it must be a lot, so I drink it with Diet Coke.

Sometimes when I order a drink, 
I tell the bartender I'm diabetic. I don't want him thinking I'm the kind of girl that cares about calories.

But I am. I really, really am. 
I don't even know if diabetics can drink vodka. 
Someday, I expect someone to call me on it.

And all the other things I've faked my way through. 
Like that handful of orgasms, that homemade potato salad, those smiles, and that college degree.
I

I have absolute proof.
Emails & phone records,
postcards from places he
wishes I was.

She sits at my table,
alone, in position number 3,
eating a chicken caesar salad
(dressing on the side)
and drinking her unsweetened iced tea
(extra lemon).

I think of slipping a postcard
behind her check before
dropping it off.
Maybe the Louisville one that reads:

C-

This city is awful.

-K

I can't imagine what she'd do.
It doesn't even say anything good,
but she'd know.

Secrets are fun,
oh my God are they fun,
but I can't shake my suspicion
that getting caught would be too.

The look in her eye, the storm-out-of-the-restaurant,
the fallout, the relief, the regret, the stories.
I bet she'd stiff me on the tip,
but it might be worth the excitement.
II

I don't know why I'm calling him.
I've just finished mopping the floor
and counting my tips
and wishing those assholes that came in 10 minutes before closing
would have left me more than 11 percent.

It's cold out,
so cold that the dirty mop water
left over on the floor
that has seeped into the bottom of my slacks
freezes on the 15 foot walk to my car.
I don't know why I'm calling him,
other than I don't want to drive home alone.

--Meet me for a drink, I say,
but I know he won't.
He says it's too late for me to be calling,
that the kids are asleep but she's still awake and that he
doesn't know why he even picked up
other than he thought it might be an emergency.

I don't want to go home to my apartment
above my sleazy landlord's insurance company,
to my sink full of dishes I might end up throwing away
to avoid washing,
to my three pieces of furniture:
a bed, a flame stitch chair, and two milk crates
stacked to create a wobbly shelf.

--Fine, fuck you.
I try to sound like I'm joking,
just like he does when he tells me
I knew what I was signing up for.
I sit on the couch,
wrapped in a sweaty sheet,
listening to the woodpecker tap on his tree.
I need to get ready for work,
but I'm worried that
today, I'll serve his wife coffee.
I'll beg another server to take the table.
They'll ask why,
but I can't tell them it's because
I haven't even showered since her
husband spent the evening eating me out.
So I'll do it.

She'll ask me how I am, and I'll say
“Oh, you know. Okay.”
and I won't shake as I take her order
but I won't make eye contact with her either,
or her daughter, because then somehow
she'll know it's me.
That I'm the business trip,
the gym,
the grocery store.

So, little woodpecker,
tap on your tree.
Reiterate.
I feel bad that I don't feel bad.
I feel bad that I used to be good.
What Keeps the Metronome Accurate?

This isn't a run-out-the-clock kind of situation.
Sweetheart, watch.
It is what you hate most performing what you love.
It is deliberate and it is grotesque.
Watch.

My darling,
I can't run forever.
I just want to sit at my piano.
Let me play your concertos.
Let me crescendo.

I'm afraid you might die soon.
Why aren't you?
I used to be envious of your will to live,
but now you're just being naive.

Listen to it tick, back and forth.
Listen to the rhythm, the tempo.
Prestissimo to Presto to Vivace to Allegro to Maestoso to Andante to Adagio to Largo to Grave.

It is the quartz crystal that keeps the metronome accurate.
People Like Me

People like me.
That isn't the problem.
But I can't figure out what is.

I look nice. I shower daily.
I blow-dry then straighten my hair,
and I use a deodorant/antiperspirant
even though it might give me Alzheimer's.

I smile at strangers, and I put money into parking meters
that aren't mine, but will expire soon.
I hold doors open for old people and children
and people in wheelchairs and pretty much everyone, really.

I'm charming. I wear fun dresses
and I donate often to a handful of charities.
I get practically every job I apply for,
and an A on every test.

I have very little credit card debt, and
a family that calls me twice a week.
I have friends and fresh fruit sitting on my counter
and an annual gym membership.

People buy me drinks and flowers
and dinner and books and once
someone I never even met bought me
a very expensive high-definition television.

But I've got to be honest,
65 percent of the time I want to blow my brains out.
Inventing Ashtrays

I don't smoke cigarettes but sometimes when I'm alone I pretend I do and I pretend I have a homemade ashtray that a friend made for me, or bought for me at a garage sale. I imagine my friend got up early one Saturday and walked around his or her neighborhood looking for an end table or a set of dishes or maybe some bargain books and he or she saw a pretty ashtray made of clay and dragon tears and thought, “You know what? Carling would love this. It looks just like her.” I pretend my friend presented me with this ashtray like it was no big deal, like he or she barely even thought about it. But I know the truth.
How I Know I Love You

I pick my at my cuticles until they're a bloody mess, and I bite my fingernails until there's nothing left to chew. But your hands and your fingers and the way you thrust yourself against me when you're lying on top of me in bed, while you're holding my hand above my head against the mattress pretending not to notice my grotesque hands is really quite charming.
A Pleasant Evening

I'm driving,
I always drive, you always make me drive,
or maybe I choose to drive,
because you can't drive, and when I let you drive,
I just yell at you for not being able to drive,
and I ruin the whole evening.

And we're sitting at the restaurant,
in a corner booth, and you're
blowing out the candle lighting our table
because you think it's funny.
And you're telling a story about work,
and I'm trying to pay attention,
but I'm distracted by the fact
that every time I swallow
my ears click like an old rotary telephone.
There has got to be something wrong with me.
Last week you said it was nothing,
fluid left over from my last cold, but I haven't been sick
in years. So it has to be a tumor or something, right?

So I keep trying to swallow discreetly,
hoping that the next time I swallow,
they won't click and pop, and then
I can relax, and we can enjoy our evening.

And the check comes, and you
make a snotty joke about how I
“just had to get the most expensive salad on the menu.”
But I'm still swallowing and not really paying attention,
which is good, because that would normally start a fight.
You're getting out your credit card, and this reminds you
that we forgot to pay the electric bill, and, shit! your
car payment is due next week too. Then you say,
“Maybe I shouldn't have taken you out tonight.”
But I hear you this time and I say
“For Christ's sake, can't we just have one good evening?”
Transtibial Prosthesis

It wasn't the appearance she found revolting, it was the smell. Instantly foul, like sweat and dirt and old skin. As soon as he clicked open the latch, she could smell it, and as he rolled the fiberglass liner down his stumps, it became almost intolerable. She told him to; it was her own fault.

He tried to ease the awkwardness, asking silly questions, the kind everyone asks when you first start dating, like What's your favorite movie or color? Food? Hard questions for a girl that's not in the mood to like anything, for a girl that's too distracted by half-shins hanging off the edge of the bed, dangling like dead weight, to think of a fake answer. Well what's your favorite anything?

She tried to picture what his feet would look like if he had them. Would they, too, be blistered and callused? She tried to imagine them, tried to pretend they were there. Anything would be better than this.

He had placed the parts next to him and they stood on their own, like an unfinished robot.

And after all this, it still wasn't until he told her that sometimes he had to be in a wheelchair while his legs were being repaired that she knew this would be going nowhere.
The neighbors blink
as they watch fathers talk about
dead children into a
bouquet of microphones,
while mothers clean dead gnats out
of dirty light fixtures.

We've reserved the plot and hired the best
florist in town.
- Tell me, darlings,
  what are your favorite flowers?
  I need to inform my acquaintances.

It's been weeks, but it hasn't happened yet
like we were promised in coded lottery numbers
and late night news stories.
In anticipation, we've already begun
our sleeping pill dependency.

We've moved them to the basement,
just to get used to the idea.

If their children were murdered,
ours must be next.
How to Load a Shotgun

If you don't know how,
you can look it up on the internet.
Or get up after your dad leaves for work,
start drinking Southern Comfort,
and use the trial-and-error method.
By 10:30 AM you'll be hungry.
Drive to the grocery store,
and buy some food--
whatever you want your last meal to be.
Make it good.

If you do know how,
you should look up how to kill yourself
with a shotgun.
It's harder than you'd think.
It requires use of your feet
or an elaborate system
involving strings and pulleys.
Or a really good/well-paid friend.
The plus side of having friends like that
is that then it's murder,
and you might not go to hell.

If you're not sure of the difference
between a shotgun and other assorted hunting guns,
you should go for the handgun
in your father's safe.
The one you shot on your grandparents' farm
at soda cans and that limping buck.
You may have to look up how to break into a safe,
perhaps a blow torch will help,
but other than that – few instructions,
just a few drinks
to get the balls to pull the trigger.

Come on, do it.
I'm tired of worrying about you.
It's Best to Be Prepared

I walked to the bridge over the spillway
in the old neighborhood,
the spillway I used to be afraid to jump across,
the one that everyone else would jump across.

I went to the bridge
and I dropped my Manolo Blahnik off the side
pale pink, peep toe, Serra stiletto with the strip of vintage floral
($675, an indulgence I couldn't afford but thought I deserved).

I walked to the bridge and dropped the left one off,
watched it tumble down the concrete
through the built-up moss and dirty water
into the creek/river below.
A creek because I could see the bottom,
but a river because the current was strong enough
to carry it away.

I saved the right one for later,
for some Sunday afternoon.
I spoke to a friend on the phone that day, who asked
what I was up to.
I said, Planning a funeral.
-Who died?
You never know. I like being prepared.
She hung up after saying,
- You always do this.

I took the shoe and threaded a ribbon
through the back sling,
dipped it in honey
and then into birdseed, and
hung it on a tree branch in the park
down the street from my apartment.
I sat for hours, waiting for the birds to eat it, waiting for bugs to stick to the honey, waiting for anything - the local hooligan to come by with a switch blade to cut the thing down. But it just stayed there, swinging like a lonely, dirty, pretty little piñata.

Those shoes were the most expensive thing I ever purchased. I only wore them once on a blind date that a coworker set me up on. They didn't even get me a second date.
No Known Benefit

I'd never been a subject before, until
he wanted a picture of my sunburned goosebumps --
Asked me to lie down, as he traced circles on my back
with an ice cube.
But the ice felt good on my blistering skin,
and the photo was unobtainable.
He tried so many things:
grazing my side with his fingernails,
videos of close Olympic races,
and inspiring speeches by American presidents.
Frustrated, he said, “Can't you do anything right?”
And began packing up his lighting equipment.
Then the tornado sirens began, and
my skin, dry and cracked,
mustered up the courage to contract at every hair follicle
creating the landscape he was looking for,
creating the perfect photo.
But it was too late.
“I didn't want to be in your gallery anyway,”
but I was lying.
Alice says, “The river looks low today.” I think the river looks high, but Alice likes the river to play with surface tension, likes it to dome over like a full glass of milk, so that it only takes the tip of a crane's wing to begin the flood. I don't know why I give a shit about what Alice says. The river looks high to me. The highest it has in weeks. She hasn't been around to even know how low the river has been and how lucky we all should be that it finally rained enough for the river to look high.

I've been stealing her mail. She asked me to get it for her while she was gone, and I did, but then I read a lot of it. Her passport came, and I put it in my glove compartment next to four years of insurance slips and my secret cigarettes. If she leaves me again, I won't be able to handle it. I can take the trips to San Francisco, or even Nova Scotia, but I can't take another continent.

Most people don't realize that there are only six continents now. Someone decided that Europe and Asia would become one continent, which makes sense when you read the definition of “continent.” They call it Eurasia. Alice probably already knows this, but I tell her about it anyway. Then I say, “I think Eurasia is a much prettier word than Europe and Asia combined.” She says, “Eurasia is Europe and Asia combined.”
This is a Poem about how much I Love My Cat

I really love him a lot.
Maybe too much.
In fact, I'd rather you die, reader,
    than him.

There are many reasons that I love him,
aside from his big eyes and his ability
to jump six times his height.
He doesn't tell jokes that only he laughs at.
He doesn't invite himself out to the bar
with me. He doesn't talk about worthless
bullshit, like the fight with his wife,
or his dog that had to go to the vet, or that time his dad
had a 'Nam flashback at his sixth birthday party.
He doesn't really talk about anything at all.
Except that he's hungry, or that he wants
to go outside and chase birds.

I don't give a shit about you,
reader, at all. I don't think I'd care
if you were gunned down while filling
your gas tank, or diagnosed with Lou Gehrig's Disease.
If your child were kidnapped, I might briefly think,
aw I hope they find her, and when they do find her,
dead in a ditch by the river, I'll barely think twice
while I feed my cat a half cup of Meow Mix
(the organic formula for indoor cats).

I like knowing that when he's finished eating, he'll come
lay next to me in bed, warming my side, listening
about my day.

Maybe if you called my up once in a while, reader, and asked
me how the family is doing
or, hell, how my cat is.
Maybe if you thanked me when I hold the door open for you,
Maybe if you complimented my new dress,
Maybe if you published my manuscript,
I'd care about your assassinations & diseases & dead children.
But you don't
and you won't.
So go fuck yourself, reader.
    Or don't.
    Whatever.

Because I care about very few things in my life.
    One of them is my cat,
and none of them is you.