

ABSTRACT

TITLE OF DOCUMENT:

THE ISSUE OF MIRRORS

Shenandoah Sowash, Master of Fine Arts, 2011

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This collection is a series of portraits of various facets of the self. It depicts various speakers moving through suffering, madness, addiction, lust, heartbreak, and settings ranging from rural Ohio to Brooklyn. The diction and syntax suggest both pathos and comedy, often within a single line. The ordinary experience becomes an opportunity for exploration and discovery, and sites of tragedy are not sites of victimhood, but spaces for productive play.

THE ISSUE OF MIRRORS

By

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Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Maryland, College Park, in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts
2011

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I

Blood Orange

A life lived in bitter slices is
rarely impressive. Go down big,
something the boys will remember:
royal apathy, a flesh-eating habit,

sour blood, sweet peel.

Ants

Between the train tracks waltzed ants building
castles. They moved in dull circles before me.

I took them at their word. Some carried boats,
others oars; others wore hats with ribbons

and applauded the progress. I said to them, I'm sick
of drowning, sick of wearing

my corpse on my back. Crack! My corpse sang along
my spine but I kept on along the tracks with all the ants in hats.

They ate my feet, my legs, my knees,
up to my wrists so I ran. I ran all the way in my hat.

Beyond Ohio

To live in Ohio
is to fail to live anywhere else,
so each town strives
for a gazebo, a President's home,
a stopping point on the Underground Railroad.

There are no seasons here. The miners
bore so deep they severed Earth's cycles,
so people wait for poinsettias.

To live in Ohio
is to learn about Mike Shear
the gay who moved
to Mansfield to work at King Wok,
beauty queen Tina, later a hooker,
and Charlie Ackerman,
the mayor's son who fell through the ice.

Girls like us dreamt of blowing smoke rings
in a Chicago flat, laughing,
At least we're not Charlie Ackerman.
Damn Charlie had to linger and perish.

But his funeral was better than
any beauty pageant we'd win,
any boy we'd love, any mother we'd be.

To lionize a mediocre boy
is the business of Bellville. But to die before failing,
as Charlie did, is the destiny of girls like us,
girls who sing in the choir and wait for their escape,
no matter which river.

The Young Arthritic: Upon Losing My Hands

A little girl, I wore my rage like a paper church, spat birdseed at children. And for each street marble, someone lost an eye.

This is what comes of a little one's sins: the gnarled hands of the very old. I tended gardens of carcass in my fingertips. I carried

ghosts in my knuckles. I played cards with knives on my hands, stabbed the Queen, Ace, Jack, their red portrait faces sullen as mine.

If rage is a young woman, let her fly with wire wings. Let her carry her corpse on her back.

Morning Surgery

I have found a machine in my skull. Each morning
I pour the oil, shut hard my eyelids, and the machine sings.

O surgery of daybreak! Morning reminder
that I still live thanks to oil and my machine.

Lately my machine reports mountains, valleys
of brain, new desert landscapes, even new flora.

Lately I do not resist her. Machine!
I see many mountains.

Gone West

It was the year women rocked my heart and I poured vodka down their pale throats.
We'd been hurt and found solace, heads between our legs.

A Minnesotan celebration of cowboy criminality, Jesse James Day is not for the
aesthetically sophisticated. Everyone sings Tom Petty.

Casey's heroes were Michelangelo, Emma Goldman, and whoever wrote
The Moosewood Cookbook, whose recipes have too many onions.

What I want to say is that women love better.

Jesse James wasn't captured in Minnesota, but he robbed First National Bank
in Northfield; it's an opportunity for the historical society to fundraise.
And the kids love it.

It was the year I judged men by how many times I could hit them before they'd ask me
to stop, or threaten to hit me back. *I can't bring myself to hit a girl*, they'd say.

Well, you could, couldn't you?

Casey kissed with the fixation of a Sphinx. Later she left, chased a folk singer to Arizona.
She sent me pot on my birthday, and candles. It's good to chase things that go west.

What I want to say is that it's good to roam. People, like bites, like bruises, vanish.

Jesse must have felt relieved when they caught him in Missouri. He knew he'd die,
and he knew he was a legend. Casey liked the Ferris wheel the best.

How did love taste? I never knew, bumbling gay girl, cross mother's eyebrows,
later a husband, then a phone call, more candles, gone west.

Old Blue Book

Not her eyes, or what was left of them, but her mouth,
gums blue from the Popsicle at Coney Island, her lips bruised

to make her handsome, or a monster. The newspaper published her
with those blue lips, but they were funny there, the text beside her,

her prior convictions, her sentence: twenty years for robbing
a gas station with a samurai sword.

Her lips like the spine of an old blue book, no title, no press,
her lips pinned together with dry flaps of skin, Carmex making it worse.

You'd think she'd choke on her own horror show teeth, or choke on the rot
between her teeth. But she didn't have teeth. (I looked.)

Batter Rage

Let's wear our grief like wreaths, pour it waxy, make it into dresses
with somber ivory buttons,
wear them on Tuesdays to the salon,
dress up like pitiable birds for parties.

Marching bands in our eyes, let us assume we are crazy in a comfortable way,
like bruised women in purple on the bus,
reading glasses taut around the neck, props that never
reach our noses, let alone our eyes.

When the man says we are sullen brats, we laugh for a whole hour
to prove him wrong, light bulb shards in our palms,
blue willow smash, pithy stigmata,
ballad of the working girls.

Those poor girls, dressed as hookers for Halloween *again*,
mothers stuffing starred thongs into purses,
careerist shoplifting, the girls' lips held closed
with old gold chains.

Handling instructions: bring toys, options, rigor, and rage,
bring fat books on stupid topics, Bibles, jester dolls,
bring 18-hour bras, drooping underarms, aging
hookers with glass eyes.

Good Reason

And what did it mean, what did it mean
but misery? From my mother I learned misery's

no reason to be unhappy, that came later,
in small storms and dolls. No, from her

I learned happiness comes with time, age, beauty.
A happy woman is a thoughtless one,

but what did thought matter anyhow? Once I bit off
a piece of tongue, it didn't bleed.

Once Ben came to visit, but his voice was hoarse.
I am always loving men who speak from their throats.

In storms and at night, with dolls clutched in fists, I do not know
misery. *Hard love*, she'd say, *means you mean it*.

To her, I offer my tragedy. And clutching her wrist watch, sobbing
in the car while she dies, well, what *does* that mean?

The storms are not behind me.

Yet I trust the body, the tongue and the wrist,
and if I die first, it will be reasonable.

There will be reasons, sound explanations,
ones anyone could know.

Cardamom Seed for Miriam

Here's a picture of not her, or her husband,
but a violet, cinematic close-up, fierce

as she once was, chatting up
the man at the bar in her tired

fur coat. What if she takes me at my word:
there is no death, Miriam, only leaning

on life. What if I placed a cardamom seed
on her tongue for luck? Her mouth a sick violet,

thin lines above her lips, eyes like miniature
craters. Her skin hangs on her bones, her ribs

press calm against her heart. Or say the cardamom
seed does nothing. What death leans harder than one

that can't come soon enough?

Jellyfish

All afternoon we've been coring apples
with the conviction of prison bars.
The sky threatens to open. A train passes
over the apartment, steps off the tracks
and lands in my palm. The bowl of apples
spills like people out of taxis – round,
red-faced for Christmas. My palm is the size
of a Buick, still too small to hold the train.

We are fragile as jellyfish, as the little boys who
mock the octopus in its aquarium. Today the apples
are animal hearts and we carve them. Your hands
are sticky with juice and you touch my face.
Your touch threatens to destroy an adequate day.
The sky seeps now and light takes over. I've been here
before, but this time it's night and I wear a dress of fog.
I taste heart each moment, sense the train before it falls.

For Jasmine in Miami

The bus station closes early on Tuesdays,
so you're stuck, so you try to make friends
with 3 a.m., but it doesn't work. Jasmine,
poor sweet Jasmine, stuck between a tired year
and a prince. The prince of oatmeal pies and lost
nickels. His charisma was never characteristic,
just stalled inside the theory of a good man.
Inside your purse: friendship bracelets,
a wool scarf, Plan B, a packet of duck sauce.
These are your markers;
one gets you close, one gets you closer,
one gets you here. Here. Find a mattress,
Jasmine. Find a job. Eat the aspirin; sleep
too long. I know you hate Florida. I know
you miss New York. I know you hate birthdays,
particularly your thirtieth which no one
remembered. A broken zipper
on your purse, poor one, without me in
Miami.

Tardy for Saint Dymphna's Funeral

Saint Dymphna, saint of sad children, did you see me coming?
Surely you knew I'd be running through my pre-school hallway
with an autumn ornament torn from a bulletin board of a hundred
little traced turkey hands, gripping my shredded paper pet from art class,
the one you warned the boys would tear down, they'd be jealous
maybe, tear it up at lunch, leave it in a place I'd see,
on the classroom door maybe, the teachers' open mouths sighing
*those darned boys, darned dirty fingers, always their fierce little hands
in their pants darned boys, darned boys,* but I'd be there for sure,
I'd never miss your service, the principal hosting a party,
the fathers and mothers wearing green paper hats,
the teachers too, the kids tracing my fingers over your blue lips,
& you with your head placed in your hands, your head snapped off like a turkey's,
snapped off by your father, snapped off by thick hands
that pulled your hair, dropped spiders down your dress, fed you devils
on toothpicks, poured vinegar down your throat, but you knew
I'd be running, running to drop my paper turkey in your coffin,
running to get there in time before they shut the lid.
The teachers put crayons on tables so we'd have something to do,
draw pictures of your head in your hands and color you blue,
yellow or orange or red, so you'd know they'd miss you & love you
& remember you & I'd miss you & love you & remember you too.
Saint Dymphna did you hear the boys got another? Always their fierce
little hands in girls' little cubby holes.

Steeple

Like Mary, I sought grace in gold-leaf,
triadic holiness, crimson gowns before
acrylic made her flat. When sitting
for portraits, she didn't grin.
To grin would thwart the throne,
and the cross? An object of wood.
They never paint my feet, she'd say, her
mannered toes hidden under tapestries,
twisted, some said. Around her miniature
men with canes and cloud-beards.
This world came before anatomy,
and her hands appeared gloves of flesh,
governed not by bone, but style.
Mary: have you paused between acts?
I have, but in the portrait of today,
only oddness seems natural: your head
a moon-sphere, the landscape mathematical,
Christ clutching your breast, confused, as if
love came easily. Outside the gallery
I breathe too hard. Each steeple stabs the sky.

For Margaret Dying of Herself

In a delusion of sculpture, you sit
on the edge of a hospital bed.

You meant to live in the in-betweens of lard and skeleton,
blood and bone. You wanted slivers, medals, diamonds.

Now you're a maypole in the pavement. You have no ribbons.
You glow hollow. You bald in a white bed.

She's unavailable right now.
The girls are in Snack.

Your ribs won't wait for you, already pushing like twins.
Your bones, your poinsettias menace

and flourish. Your vitals vacate.
Your man waits.

A Tree Made of Needles

You put one hand above the other,
licking a tree made of needles. Not
pine needles, but needles your mother
used to sow quilts. Borders
of blackberry vines woven against pink.
The tree was on a cliff, and the needles
spilled onto the clouds below, and onto
the backs of the birds. It was warm,
suspiciously warm for the altitude,
like living between a bird's wings.
I'm told I'll need the birds one day,
but which day? Which bird?
How many needles?

Margie on the Front Porch

Margie grew up in Bellville, which I only mention because if you're from Ohio, you know that Bellville may as well be any other town except it has more trailers and the V & M's burgers are the best in three counties.

I can't speak to her upbringing, though coming from Bellville, I wouldn't expect much. At 17, Margie started selling hand jobs to men in nearby mining towns, then blow jobs, then herself. When the cops caught her, Captain Dowling said she was pretty,

sent her to church, got her tested, and married her. No children, though I never had the full story. I just knew she believed in Jesus and smoked menthols on her front porch in the evening. When the captain got rough, she left, worked nights at Eddie's Pizza.

She said the work was risky: the parking lot wasn't lit. Dowling found her fast, smelled her from miles away like I hear sharks smell blood. She never had a chance. A couple of weeks later, a Boy Scout found her choking

on weeds in the Kokosing, neck snapped. *Inside Edition* came with their cameras. We all knew who did it. Some people said she had it coming. Some people said it was too bad. Some people said they wrapped her in plastic and took her back to Bellville.

I said sometimes shit happens. Some souls, like necks, like Margie's pretty bones, are made for breaking. So the Scout goes to Mansfield for therapy and everyone in Bellville tapes *Inside Edition*, and some stories are sad no matter how you tell them.

I like to think of Margie on that porch though, Virginia Slim in hand, blouse tucked into her skirt, silent. Never even a hum, a sigh. Margie on the front porch. *It wasn't that bad*, she says. *Some people just get broke, and that ain't the half of it.*

II

The Issue of Mirrors

Half John's face is blue and red and in the delicate
shape of a lost country. A birthmark, he claims,
but once when drunk he told me that at fifteen,
his father put his face to the stove flame while
his mother was in Vegas. His face is sculpted in grief.
So when I met him at twenty, broke in Brooklyn,
he apologized. He hadn't shaved that morning
in the East Village, instead waking up late, throwing
take-out to the dog, skirting altogether
the issue of mirrors.

Love Poem for a Southern Brooklyn Gang Boy, 1959

You fold your smokes into your shirt sleeve
and I fix my hair in the cigarette machine mirror.
You hold me in the telephone booth, whisper that
I'm the prettiest gal in this booth, the prettiest gal
at Coney Island, at least today, an idle Tuesday.
While you smoke, I draw my eyebrows
with thick black lines and fix my hair with a pink
plastic clip. I draw your name with eyeliner along my wrist,
write *love* across your knuckles.
I pretend I'm not hung over and so do you.
This place is a boardwalk of broken dreams, you say.
You live so hard, Johnny, beyond the genius of Coney Island.
The beach never enough for you, your grogginess,
drunk at 10 a.m., escapades down the roller coasters.
Like you, I live hard too, but my suffering only mimics yours.
You have real problems, a little boy in Vegas,
and I just wonder what dress to wear, red or more red.
So you be famous and I'll be your sidekick outside the frame.
In the booth beside us a girl picks at a bit of eye shadow
on her mother's cheek. It's impossible to tell how long
the shadow's lived on the mother's face.
While you lean your head against my breasts,
I look out from the booth and see seven women
wearing seven hats. Some wear rings and hold
each other's arms for help walking or for support
while searching in purses for tissue or cigarettes.
I have thought hard about these women,
have dreamt of them in their lace
and wondered if they had real problems.
In their purses: loose aspirin, peaches half-eaten,
miniature dictionaries, television schedules,
a foul-smelling tissue, lost rubber bands, photographs
of children with ponies, gold necklaces broken.
You could care less, now napping, your greased
hair flat against the glass booth door. You snore a little,
asleep in booze's drawl. You're hiding your erection
under your folded hands, and here I'm thinking about women, too.
So this is tenderness in a phone booth. I'll take it, and give some to you.

Mr. Carson

Mr. Carson made a paper mache
whale for the third grade classroom.

I was eight and smitten.

Mr. Carson was from the Nazarene
Teachers' College in Centerville and

even Mrs. Osborne said, *Just because
I've ordered doesn't mean I can't look at the menu.*

Mr. Carson taught English but one day he wrote
God on the board during a grammar lesson and

Mrs. Osborne, a good Catholic,
said, *That's enough*, and sent Mr. Carson to

private school where
he taught *God* a lot,

until the whale became
his thought.

Jonathan

Jonathan sends me pictures of his daughter.
I have no interest in children, but love collapses
into more love, so I say, *she's beautiful*. Jonathan
will love me for saying that, for touching my throat
while I speak. What a glorious liar I've become.
I tell Jonathan lies intricate as clocks, but lately
my hands stick. Jonathan looks tall standing naked
in my bedroom. He smiles with broken teeth, not broken
but collapsed into his gums. He will love me for my lies,
about what? About him, of course, that I adore him, find
him charming, that his adulterous methods are cunning.
Later Jonathan sends me pictures of his cock. I show
the pictures to other men, to make them laugh, make them
hard, so they'll love me or think they do long enough to take
me to their cars and drive me lovely places, buy me pretty
things. I want to be adored, you see. I want to take each
day and make an altar of it, honor the mistresses who came
before me, paint my lips pink, make love to men in cars.
I hear the smile in Jonathan's voice, *you know me so well*,
but without the lies, the charm, each moment falling into
the next, I'm a vague pithy child with bitten nails, sunburn.
And the clocks? On shelves behind the eyes, their hands
sweep up without a tick.

Agreement

He said he'd bolt spiders to my eyelids
if I'd spank him. I said make sure
they stay alive, I'll see the world between
eight legs. He said fine and I beat him with
my bare pink palm, leaving prints for days.
He ordered the spiders but they never came,
except for one in a well-taped box.
The spider couldn't see. He said talk dirty and
I cried dead spider! Honeysuckle man!
Lurching, the spider waited for the bolt.
No bolt. What holes we leave between legs.

Curt Oaf

Earlier today a curt oaf frisked us.
We two, all feathers and oyster shells,
undressed for him. The oaf fell out of favor,
easing off to sleep, but we two stayed up
to argue. Even worse, the oaf awoke
and cut off our dresses, leaving us tired Eves
loafing on coastlines. Leave, oaf. You'll frisk us glad
until we finish this reasonable etude.
First, though, save us from further oscillating –
catch us even when we squeal. Even when we don't.

Dollar Store

This morning I walk up a broken sidewalk to buy
a toilet plunger. I worry the cat will drink
the yellow puddle on the tile floor. At the Dollar Store,
I reach for a plunger on a too-high shelf, and it falls,
lands on its rubber base, a branchless tree in the home goods aisle.
I wait too long in line, four dollars in my fist, at home
an angry cat, pots scarred with eggs. Back home, the cat flirts
with birds she hears but never sees. Once Chris went to a casino –
he couldn't sleep – he thought maybe he'd get a poem
out of it. *The poem wasn't too good*, he said,
but the people were perfect – stretching clichés into
rubber noses, neon visors, hip packs and other
consequences of being broke in a boring place.
Chris used to say, *You'd forget to leave the house if the cat
didn't get hungry*. Around me children cry, drop imaginary
toys, crash imaginary cars. Their parents shuffle coupons
like decks of all Jacks. We all find our own ways to be loud.
I live alone, though Chris stayed a week. When I learned
he'd leave, I searched his bag – weed wrapped in plastic,
orange toothbrush, and a green *New Testament*
someone handed him at the train station. Right before he left, I watched him
read *Helter Skelter*: Manson and his posse of lithe cowgirls with knives.
Then he was gone, and aside from my smokes, nothing was missing.
Where are the sponges, the garbage bags, the dildos, the frozen pizzas –
the items that prove I'm all right, I'm working, I'm lonely but
I'm convincing? Yet what is more manipulative than a single woman's
home – a stage – the alphabetized love letters kept in files in her desk!
Some corners aren't worth looking around. Today I mean to go shopping
or make friends or cut out pictures of independent women in magazines.
Every book seems too long to start. I've forgotten to leave the house.
The cat's hungry. My nails have cracked – tiny shark teeth at the end
of each finger. I leave more smokes on the table, maybe he'll be back.

Cincinnati Scrap

Your hands are cut
up by our cat.

One hand holds a book
and the other hand
picks at your face.

Cincinnati is hard
on Catholic women.

I want to ask which itch
you're scratching, why
the city never makes you

sad. You say, *I'm reading*,
and never look up.

Dress for Eliot

If I stand before my bedroom
mirror, Eliot must walk four steps
past the door before he can see me,
crying or laughing or wearing pathetic

lingerie. Or pretending to read or
maybe even reading. He must walk
three steps to see my *smart* books,
placed at eye-level on an oak shelf.

Two steps before spotting the cat,
filthy but luscious, resting on the bed.

One step before he sees my dress
is made of paper.

The Forgetful Balcony

Strange how my body forgets
her keeper, like I forget you, or
like a child who forgets her mother
napping beside her in the nursery,

how I walk out of my motel room
in California, stoned, into traffic,
Highway 26, though I know I'll live,
the cars merely obstacles, my legs

like the low fragile balcony where I
watch men on motorcycles dance below,
my dress catching on their handlebars,
tearing but not too bad, nothing I can't

fix, though you say I can't fix a thing
because my brain is shot, ruined by the pills,
or the pot, or the motels, broken deadbolts,
tired comforters, pillows in closets, one shit

day after another, like today on the highway
where I laugh at the men in leather, miniature
men, really, from this height, my frayed dress
a stupid flag from no country, but strange how

you forget too, how you leave me
dodging leather knights on metal horses.

Portrait of My Own Man

I painted a star beside your head
to complete the portrait, rapid
strokes, a black cat beneath your feet.

Next I fashioned wings of gold, stretched
fishnet across your canvas shoulder blades,
my own man. Formed at first for ruse or

pretend, soon you appeared in light – in dusty
chandeliers' piquant bulbs, in red shadows
slanted in train stations, white spots on

rock star faces. I painted you red lips to sing,
eyelids to bat about like prey, young love
ogling you. I tore bark from trees as a girl,

placed the scars in graveyard rows,
played fetch with men, so when the portrait tore,
I put it away, begged it to stand back

from me. Occasional man in paint:
I lit you poorly, from across the bedroom,
your organ green, inedible.

Breakfast Meditation

This morning will be different; my toast will taste sweet.
You'll talk about the day ahead – what you'll accomplish.

You don't hate the morning – I think this makes us different.
You say I should *make friends with the morning*, that toast

is a healthy beginning. I pretend I am an animal gnawing
your linens, and I growl, but you don't laugh. I used to invent

headaches, brutal headaches, disheartening, I'd sigh
oh love, I can't go to the party with such a headache,

bad breath, a battle brewing in your head. *Lazy bones*, you'd say.
It's true. I slept through too much. Sometimes I'd go to the parties

and drink and sleep on other people's beds. The women at the parties
knew I was too young, that no one would ever make my toast

taste better. I hated their monotonies, and now
I hate mine, almost the way I hated grown-ups when I was a child –

always so angry about so little. This morning I'll tell you about the dream
I had last night: I was playing piano in my old house in Ohio,

and you said *take lessons*, but I played anyway.

Hearse

A hearse in Oxford, Ohio.
I know the man inside,
his muddy skin, his coarse beard,
cheek nicked with a hunting knife,
with his own hunting knife.
The windows rolled all the way down,
rain rolls onto his coffin,
the oak beaten with water,
the fish seep from heaven.
Fat frogs seep from heaven,
mourners cry with frogs for hats,
orchids tossed under the tires.
In the graveyard a child flies a kite,
another child sings a dirge,
but not for the mud skin man,
but not for the mud skin man.

Pretty Spider

Your moan echoes,
magnifies the windows.

Lust sets you going
like a pretty spider.

The bedroom, not ours, slaps
our backs, your moan takes mine,

eats it for an early supper.

What I've come to count on: your voice
gives me an ear infection.

A final moan. A last slap.
I float from the bed wearing nothing
but jeweled pins in my hair.

All night words flicker
against the yellow sheets.

Your mouth opens with sleep,
snores like another's.
The window wonders.

Then it's morning. On the porch your baldness
shines. Booze is a language.

We sit on stools
blanker than new
museums.

I'm as much your lover
as a mosquito is your lover.

The tinny consonants hunger for a mouth
but the door never opens in time, this time.

The Prophet of Fried Chicken

In Joe's Chicken Shack
a man is speaking of eternity
among the day-old *Posts*,
jars of hard-boiled eggs
and pigs' feet, bottom-feeding fried fish,
old orange cakes, souring Twinkies, speaking
of heaven, yelping prayers to God, the Lord
having his way with the man's tongue, speaking
Jesus saves! Nourishment saves!
He raises his two drumsticks,
conducting the patron orchestra who are silent
aside from the chew, break of bird bones.
Now the *Posts* tremble in their cages,
lift their tired gray hands up, sing *Jobs*, sing *News*, sing
Features! Obituaries! Arts! Weekend! And the eggs sprout
stubby wings, hustle inside the jar as if drowning
in pickled broth, then push the little ones,
women and children, to the surface as the Twinkies grow
erect with grace, their cream edging out of their marigold
mattresses. In Joe's Chicken Shack, in Joe's Chicken Shack,
a man speaks of eternity. If it could only last forever.

Questions for a Husband

Have you considered
the skeleton in
each little child?

Have you yet pondered
bones, formal as spoons,
rows of bones in labs?

Have you scripted your
entrance in pink costume,
or do you just fucking wing it

like I always do?

III

Noose

You'd think that with a noose around my throat,
men would pay more attention.

You'd think that I could cut it off, toss it
in the river, but a noose must be

sawed chronically, around the throat, and
every moment, so I carry a saw

in my purse and wait for it to grow.

Dumpster

I quit drinking once.
Tossed the whiskey out
and into the dumpster
behind Cedar Street.
A half bottle. I tossed it.

Then it was Thursday.
I was thirsty for whiskey,
so I skipped outside, alone,
and peered into the dumpster
behind Cedar Street.

Where was it? Already
it was buried by other trash,
by trash no one wanted,
noxious milk cartons, trash
no one wanted.

Placing one hand on the
trash's surface, like touching
water, I reached in, felt around
like searching for children's toys
under a sullen bed.

My arm vanished in trash, and
I kept digging, up to my shoulder,
my hand a pale fish in brawny reef.
I found only empty bottles, paltry
plastic things thrown away.

I looked for others, too, pulling
my hand out of the dumpster
only long enough to make sure
I was alone, and I was, alone
with a filthy green right arm.

Before I dove in, I said a prayer:
find it fast and get out before
someone spies you. No bottle.
Dirty sober girl, a failure in green.
What refuge. What grief we dig.

Family Portrait from Montgomery General Hospital

The four of us smile in scrubs. Jennifer cries, *Suck in your guts!*
Portly Jonathan leans on the piano keys like a lounge singer,
a plastic fork between his teeth, Charles never meets
the camera's gaze, and I smile, the only gal on the ward

who's washed her hair today. The camera snaps. We can't touch
here, but Jonathan reaches out, his hands abandoning the keys
to give me bunny ears, two fingers split like a sundial. We laugh.
Then the portrait's finished and Jennifer skips to Visitation to greet

someone, hugs him, the nurses shake their heads, Charles returns
to Isolation, chats to himself, animated as a child. Jonathan plays
a mean ragtime, a ditty he wrote called *Christmas in Rehab*,
and Jennifer's back from Visitation. We slow-dance without touching.

Behind us is a Christmas tree, four televisions, tablecloths
in stacks, plastic spoons in green boxes, Jell-O, books, seventeen
total, three in Chinese, which Jennifer pretends to read to make
us laugh. Picture these people sobbing in sweaty blue scrubs.

We all did. I did, hard at first, but I learned not to upset the others.
And when I began to comfort them, rock them, hold them, beg
for drugs from the nurses' station to soothe them, I knew I loved
them too dearly to see them again. I left first, the crunch of scrubs

in a suitcase, pills rattling in their orange bottles, Jonathan wailing
on his keys, singing his rehab ditty in line for afternoon blood pressure
checks, Charles all alone with his chatty buddies, his shaved head,
sweet Jennifer with her arms around me, her lost little baby doll.

Landmine

Take for example, the landmine –
genius of an instant grave.

Or take a pigeon on a farmhouse roof.
Or smell a goose's breath and sing into the cup's

elongated ear. Run your fingers down a fat man's
spine. Carson Garhart said he could

smell the trashcan fire before he lit it.
The landmine ain't no genius. It was sixth grade.

I found a dead crow. I froze its claw.
In the next world, there will be only

angels wearing robes of wrapping paper
and green bottles. They'll jingle like

breaking lampshades.

Graveyard

I.

Drunk in a graveyard with a disposable man,
I feigned fun. Invincible and scarred,
living each hurt before it hurt. I wore a crown
from Value Village and the boys said I was pretty
even with puke in my hair and no bra.

II.

The booze turned on me,
even a drop now poison.
I have lost my friend.

III.

Love started in a bad dream, shaking girl with vodka
veins, and in a church basement, women once like me
offered hugs and Styrofoam cups of tea, said come back,
so I did go back and held funerals for each scar.

Sign

Across my eyes read a blindfold sign:
this one means you harm.
Hounding across my teeth,
each bit of ivory carved into
letters in foreign alphabets.
These I showed you when smiling
or visiting the dentist.
The sign I hid under black bangs
like pillars supporting stone ceilings.
The blindfold was monstrous, modern.
My face was a broken piano,
each lettered key pierced new purple gums.
The voice whistled through teeth stagnated,
locked under the tongue.

23 Dramatic Situations

Supplication

God: Make me cry hard. Bless
each goblet, forged by experience,
about to be emptied.

Deliverance

Unfortunate tall woman:
who do you hope to save
in your rescue efforts?

Vengeance of a crime

Take the first drink and the
priests of drink won't help you. Not
a bit. Revenge for one gone.

Vengeance taken kin for kin

No poppies after this.
Memory weakens
fear for a good reason.

Revolt

Regal suffering. You
place a seed in my veined hand
and I toss it away.

Daring enterprise

Absinthe in clear glasses,
tightening its grip on promise.
Lead boldly, love?

Enigma

Interrogating this
day, you stayed asleep
for ten years but woke up
rested.

Obtaining

Overly blue, tenacious
you accosted the stout glass
like those falling from stairs.

Enmity of kin

Poor brothers in yellow
for Easter: fetching eggs,
frowning at the camera.

Rivalry of kin

Preferring solitude,
the woman took her gin cold
like her pretty sister.

Murderous adultery

There are worse things than love,
but you're a boy with an egg
for a head and no clothes.

Madness

Joy's right on time. I see
worlds between blinks, eyelashes
curtains to separate.

Fatal imprudence

I lost my brass keys, but
what does that matter except
that it's raining and cold?

Involuntary crimes of love

Crucifying myself
on your kiss, we blew
smoke rings like circus beasts.

All sacrificed for passion

Dodging between buses
in Brooklyn, sipping whiskey,
speaking fake French for fun.

Necessity of sacrificing loved ones

When I leave, you might say,
goodbye between thin papers
on your desk. Never mind.

Rivalry of superior vs. inferior

Blocked ripe vials of booze,
drunk in the morning, frozen
vodka in the ice tray.

Adultery

Deceived by silence, peach
on a wooden table, still
except the door's open.

Crimes of love

What to do but spread for

that night's handsome wine maker?

Discovery of the dishonor of a loved one

Harold saw no color.
His wife learned this after six
years in white galleries.

Ambition

Narrow oysters with small
faces, gasping in sand. You'll
see what I mean tonight.

Erroneous judgment

One day the sea will be
stillier than it is today.
We'll party like children.

Remorse

Every act the morning
after: flight.
Take, for instance, the birds.

Intention

I lit a match, but like most first-time matches,
it didn't light. A book of matches rarely works alone.

It was hell, being a match. A head forever on fire.
I visited the ward once, then more than once.

They put my name on a chalkboard. I was never to be
alone, an immense desire to burn my scrubs with me in them.

I saw myself how I thought they saw me – master of artifice.
I desired no lightness – I'd leave nothing behind, no mess.

I'd start small, a match: a graphite pillar the size of an insect.
You have no idea. I'd be free as a shot rabbit.

Sea Locks

Here the keys fit no locks.
Not that I have keys

though if I did they'd be
brass and easy

to fit in a pocket.
Today each object,

the train taking me to work,
the knife to slice the apple,

the shard of broken light on
the floor, even the wall around me,

is a weapon.
Books just tough planks to beat me

on the head, or perhaps they're oars
to ease me out to sea.

Discord

Like the day my wings carried me cozy off the ward
and doves surrounded my face, everything on fire.
Imagine a drugged infant soaring near a painting
in a wood-walled gallery: will she touch it? Will the alarm
sound? Soon over, unneeded, I dug new graves – graves
for the friends I left in the ward, for dungeon ogres, for
static men, narrow emphasis on healing, curled ice taken
for a human-made arch, tongue still bleeding, the lips a parody
of pink – graves for furry old comrades with beards, graves
for the still living underground, the lost, the passion fruit boys,
girls with tattoos, for all of them I dug new graves. Worse
than the others, I cluttered little men in jars. One said
my life is over, so I dug a grave for him. Each man an oyster
now in the earth, each an ogre with a ruby in the ear, liling on
the air like falling coins, all ink erasable, noose loose enough
to polka, celebrate, slaps on the face, back pats, missing wings.

Rehab Birthday

I checked myself in with the others: Tom who drank at his dad, resembled Pee-Wee with no playhouse; Ryan the porn-directing antique car salesman; Chuck who worked night construction and loved crack; even Diane, a Barbie doll with a lust for vodka and driving, and when Mike the counselor with perfect teeth asked me why I drank, I said, *I drank anesthetically* – he said that was common enough, but what about waking up? *Nothing*, I said on the first day, *and everything*, I said on the second day, so Mike left me alone until my birthday when we were working on healthy boundaries: an exercise with seven blankets, each representing another part of our lives: blue for the work life, yellow for family, and black for the addiction. I got to go first arranging the blankets – it was my birthday – drowning the blankets in black and Chuck said, *that's deep*, and we laughed at the paltry symbol, somehow true. Then Tom asked what it was like now, and I wrapped the black around my shoulders and cried and taunted the angry bull who wanted me dead but would settle for my misery, and Ryan, filming a porn in his head, said *one day at a time* and I saw a different scene: all of us wailing infants wrapped in blankets on the rehab floor. *These rugs hold decades of tears*, Mike said, and we laughed in unison.

Warning

Side effects

potty mouth, becoming a fat ass, chronic onion smell, delusions of fluid draining from patient's brain, flatulence, losing touch with parents, ordering dessert first, referring to oneself as an "artist," exploratory drinking patterns, increased tolerance for greeting cards, appointments with psychics, dry crotch, impaired sense of initiative, lust for early Stephen King, forgetfulness, particularly concerning birth control pills, dizziness when attending church, renewed love of Judy Blume, telling fictional stories about bad acid trips, bleeding gums due to smoking menthols and consuming cough drops simultaneously, insipid desire to smoke like Marlene Dieterich, describing situations as "so AA," hemorrhage of the heart

I. Lexapro

Before I say bye-bye to the day,
I'll look under the bathroom sink. Why
hello, says a plastic bottle. *Hello indeed.*
I tap the bottle's side and out come not
one but two joys! Am I made of luck?
Will dinner taste better? Will bitter
nightmares become handsome dreams?
My head turns orange with optimism.
Even the couch is complex. My high
heels are comfy. Will someone bring me
a kitten? I want to snuggle! She appears
beside me, marble eyes. We sit
together. We are the best of friends.
I'll toss her cage out later.

II. Ambien

I'm sleeping better though my hands
are the size of Buicks and I've destroyed
my bed. It was an accident and I prefer
the fort of pillows I've built in the living room.

This ain't no gateway drug. At the clinic,
nurses place sticky circles on my face. I receive
a stuffed animal and am told to relax. A sign:
This facility is smoke-free. Off I go! Glass
could smash in my face! My organs
could bleed! At home, I've renovated my fort
and not even the robber wakes me. What could
he steal? Trinkets from the windowsill. glass
beads, stones from souvenir shops, things
by which I remember the awake.

III. Abilify

Anyone can invent a word; see? Woe to
the copyright slut. Today's a doo-wop song.
No need to keep a diary when all my thoughts
live in a happy buzzing beehive on my head,
purple to match my scooter. My roaches sing duets.
The homeless men on the bus stare at my eyes –
not my breasts! I'll never tell their secrets.
The madwoman who sits in the front knows every song
I know. We become friends. When she says Jesus
saves, I believe her. She charms me.
Her shopping bags crammed with pumpkins, I ask if
she likes Halloween. *But of course! Everyone likes
Halloween!* Who needs shelter when I've got my own
weather system? Clear skies, mist, my favorite song.

IV. Lithium

It's sad to grow fat, but a woman with moonface,
the case of the committed, truly is made of cheese!
In group, a friend says *sick and tired? Tired's
all you've got, honey.* My friend gets garden
rights and we roll out our fat like dough across
flower beds. The drug's as crunchy as branches we
break in the garden. I'm told it ought to be taken with food.
There's a reason fat people seem jolly; they're at peace
with waste. Later, my friend's belly spreads over the neck of
the craft room guitar. I request Nat King Cole's *Straighten Up
and Fly Right.* I promise I won't cry. And I don't. On Thursdays
we take yoga with a woman thin as broth. We dream of stuffing
her with cheese. We'd hate her if her skin was more yellow

than ours. No need. She's a cheerful marigold!

V. Lamictal

Epileptics aren't the only ones with seizures. For those who suffer emotional seizing, foaming mouth, old-school hysteria, smashing dishes, throwing meatloaf, sobbing after the wrong turn on a one-way road, there are options.

I still have options. If I take the pill with a glass of water, it will dodge my teeth and ram my heart. Expect a smile in 10 minutes. If it's shaved into powder, mixed with applesauce, give me 20. I'm smiling too hard, and strangers on the sidewalk ask, *Are you ok?* Who isn't? The trick, I've learned, is to take the day and swallow it whole. Mornings are still delicate, surgical, the right tools are needed, but I don't sing the blues, and my sheets hold no nostalgia from the night before. I learn to love my swollen tongue. Lately the drug's too quick. Lately my mind screams for its supper. Lately I die like an engine.

Heaven

At first I thought, yes, this is what women do,
lie on our backs on basement mattresses.
Most of us wake up, wind up the stairs, walk
back into daylight, bodies bruised, but living.

I stayed underground, ghost-like, quiet.
Sometimes parents came down to salvage old
Halloween costumes, mermaids, Supermans.
Sometimes I frightened them. I would have died

there, but heaven was too bright and I was pale;
I would have vanished in holy light.
Later I met other ghosts who rattled bars
between my legs, sometimes too loud to sleep.

I didn't fear them; they gave me company.
With the humility of tear-hours, I relearned
everything: how to laugh at a man's joke,
how to walk after dark, how to recognize

terror, like a housecat. Later came the prodding
of public health nurses with tired faces, the phone call
that I'd tested negative, that I'd been lucky.
Later came the social worker, keeping me from

my file, like a bad student, a borderline, a basement
demon (which I was). Later came the *survivors*
in church conference rooms, the prayers to move on,
grief spilled in Styrofoam cups on fold-out tables.

*Grief is like a hole in your body, and you can't fill it
with anything except time*, one of the women said.
I thought to build a staircase from basement junk,
bad records, unflattering photographs, tins of face paint.

Yesterday I met a man who said I was *familiar*.
On the basement night, he'd seen me playing
a grand piano naked, mind doused in sweet liquor,
surrounded by make-shift choirs of drunk women.

So the night wasn't wretched entirely. I'd sung.
I finished my staircase this morning and walked up

to the kitchen, clutching my secret like a weapon.
The light, however bright, wasn't too bright at all.