2008

IN THE SPIN

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Virginia Commonwealth University

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IN THE SPIN
A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

By
Kathryn N. Beles
M.F.A. in Creative Writing, Virginia Commonwealth University, May 2008

Director: David Wojahn, Associate Professor, Department of English

Virginia Commonwealth University
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IN THE SPIN

By Kate Beles, M.F.A.

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2008

Major Director: David Wojahn, Chair of Creative Writing, Associate Professor, Department of English

In the Spin is a semi-autobiographical collection of poetry, dealing primarily with themes of family, marital infidelity, loyalty, the female body, and the tension between political vs. aesthetic existences. This is a collection of poems influenced by the work of French Feminism, Shakespeare and Faulkner, and hybrid lyric-narrative poets of the last fifty years.
MODUS OPERANDI

A reference to the Greeks:

Follow the red thread

A cliché:

If it doesn’t come naturally, leave it

A pronouncement:

This is no meritocracy

A bit of proof:

Publishing, the hired room of a paragraph

A command:

Write, but forget to sell it

A pregnant pause:

(                                       )

A Shakespearean quote:

Words without thoughts never to heaven go

An allusion to the Bible:

Isaiah burned his lips with coal

A very old word:

Shrive means to write and to repent

A circling back:
Ambition the minotaur, syntax the labyrinth

A list:

Thorax, lung, tongue, hand, baptismal, ink
All we had was nature.

Frank Bidart
ELEGY TO THOSE OTHER DAYS UNDERNEATH THIS ONE

‘Tis all in pieces, all coherence gone.
John Donne

1 Morning

Unruly sun of anti-shadow that slides across the unplaned floor, opens like a poppy on my reluctant face. Dawn through window rime, while the elk wade through outside. Dawn of his mother’s shot-dead doves and my belly emptying again and again after I put some chemical in to get closer to God. I wonder: Diana, where are you when we walk out of the woods and the light is unkind on our untouched skin? Where were you at the dawn of these dog days, curled like a wall between us? Or waking to a waterfall of grief? Dawn when I’m gone you’re gone he’s gone? Waking to a white like new snow, stinging light-blinded eyes, eyes on this empty room, empty womb, vestigial organ—the past—ripped away like some useless thing, bright biohazard, phantom-ache, rising like the pink shine of an old scar?

2 Night

Night of leg drape, night of stomach pump. Night of stockings and sex under Fauvist oil paint. O night of guavas and La Llorona and a river swimming with constrictors and those you used to love. O night of woundings and wakings and first times and last of the light. Night of choices, a long catching and losing of breath. Revenant and respiratory thrum, father-law and mother-tongue. The long night listening for twig snap and low growl, or the short night when he must leave at dawn. O Lilith, dear Laylah: teach me to talk in my sleep, build me a nest of twigs and shiny things, wrap me up tight, silence this drum, swaddle me as you would the insane.
COUNTING DOWN

3 a man, a woman, and a girl

Outside, they often were and the house was too. The bungalow was peeling blue but the steps were painted a glistening red. There was a man and woman in bed. They lay back to back. One night, the woman spat blood into a clay cup and the man looked out an open window. Under stars, the small girl ran her hand down a cedar fence and got a palm full of wood. She fell from a swing.

2 a woman and a girl

Inside it was light. An ironing-board was a table. The back porch housed a bed. One evening, a woman read alone at a cherry wood desk. As she wrote, ink spilled down her ring finger. The small girl played under a hawthorn tree. She climbed up a wall of white stucco. She hung on the sill, peered through a red-trimmed window at red hair hanging over a percussive face. The woman inside did not look up.

1 a girl

In and outside of this house it is dark. It is old, and painted like pitch. Maples lean heavy over a covered porch. Somewhere, a ball bounces. Somewhere, a hammer pounds. The girl sits in a white nightgown atop a garage, above a red car, which is closed behind doors held shut with a stick. The shingles under her bottom catch on cotton, her toes skim gutter water, and wind blows hair into her mouth.
IN THE SPIN (I)

In the evening, we watch Cosby in black and white, then get fed macaroni in the tub. In bed the white cat is heavy on my chest while I listen to mom sob into the red satin bedspread. In the morning she sings *I’m gonna wash that man right outta my hair* until we all feel tough. I sense there is some drama in this. Mom leaves for class, so I watch brother until Dad comes to pick us up. When he arrives, he turns on mom’s stereo, plays *Jump! For my love! Jump in!* real loud. Brother and I watch while he leaps around our tiny living room, kicking his feet up, dancing like someone whose legs might come loose at the knees.
I.

Mother’s hair is two long sheets of copper. A woman like the landscape stood up, belly about to erupt. She sweeps ash from the blue kitchen tile.

~

Bites her lower lip. Ring of daisies in her hair, eyes like heat shimmer over pavement. His mustache wax-tipped, yellow bow tie slightly askew. She’s twenty-one in this snapshot.

II.

Belly flat now as the field, she spits wine-red blood into the cup. All through the night. Take this offering: her blood, her body shifting at a distance under the satin bedspread.

~

Like someone crying or singing in her bath. Sluicing sound like a river. Pain a slice of lightening in the sky, pain like too much flesh.

III.

I always want to go higher—swing like a ball over the cedar fence. Cut my caterpillar with the gate. Pluck rose petals to hold bitter on my tongue

~

This young witness. His mistress at the pizza parlor, obscured by cigarette smoke. My sweaty bottom on the plastic slide, landing hard. They lean in. Pater exul.

~

Brother stays inside without rosebuds. Imagines he’s under the coffee table for the big fight.

IV.
Brother and I walk long empty trestles to town. Dry dust on our tennies. His crying face a pinwheel twisting. The choice of whether to punch or hug him. All that dust.

~

Father’s bachelor cabin: rattlers in the rock field
  linking chain of lakes
  fox at the door

~

My pets, each weighted and dropped down between the waxy water lilies. Living in the lake.

~

We back away from the mama bear standing up on her forepaws. Dad warned: whatever you do, don’t run.

~

Like wind whipping over the lake I ride my blue bike. Down the dock—Over the algae—In.

V.

Alone on the plane, I hate the smell of machine, snowblindness by clouds. In the cab, know I’m close because of California poppies, hills of grapevines striping the landscape.

~

Nana’s favorite: me, and yellow roses that stink like honey mead. I hold a whole bouquet while baby brother crawls under the coffee table in his imagination.

VI.

Angry, I Pollock the classroom wall with paint. Little Danny helps. I kiss his cheek when the splatter is thick like beach mud.

~

Brother asks when dad will be back.
VII.

They carry the garbage can together one last time. Mother tells him she’ll need something lighter soon.
GRANDFATHER, CROATIA, 1942

Unlike the Jews, the Gypsies cry out, howl, some of them even jump into the ditch before the volley and pretend to be dead.

His eyes roam the empty field of Jasenovac, over the muddied faces, stop to rest on the green water of the Sava. He reaches down to a spot by the black stain, uses the long grass to wipe spit from their Torah, rolls the calf skin gingerly, staggers to a white beard, and slides the document into the tattered shirt. In the distance, a farm wife goes about her drudgery, and, instinctually, he reaches up to tear the Z from his chest, then the jacket from his body, despite the chill, and throws it over the head of his brother, face to face with a stranger. One week ago in the tent city,

he watched his wife cook over fire and tried to read the hand of an Ustasha. One more thin Gypsy thief said the pucker white Ustasha. The sky is changing like the shoreline above him, but he reads no signs. This plowed field has become a wilderness to him. And despite what they’ll say, he takes no gold teeth, the man takes nothing but his hexes, spells he has no choice but to incant.
IN THE SPIN (II)

Me at six. She at thirty-four. 
On a walk to the store. Sun 
rising over the city, still low 
enoough to fill doorframes. Dad's 
got a girlfriend. No. Yes. Her feet 
stop.

After school, mother tells 
me: In his office, I needed 
something to break. 
(I think smash) but 
the aloe was too plump 
so I tore at the dying 
ivy. (I was too young 
to think pitiful.)

I think: I am she. She 
is me. I will grow up big, 
make his heart break. So I do. 
Again and again, until I can 
hear the tearing 
of a thousand tiny threads.

Mom, can I be a daddy someday? 
No. 
Why not? 
You're a girl honey. You can be 
a mommy. 
But I want to play 
with knives.
IN THE SPIN (III)

My small hands
    hug the back of the driver’s seat,
as if I can reach right around her body.
    The ice is black and we
are in the spin. The bridge edge
    goes by, comes closer, goes by
again. Brother is bundled beside me
    in the car seat, silent in shock.
All I can see is Mother’s
    gloved hand on the wheel, one blue-
flannel clad shoulder. The passenger
    seat sits empty. The world is winter
all around us, dirt-stained snow
    piled at the precipice: white sky, white
snow, black bridge, black edge.
    We three are the axis of the white-
littered world. I am held hard
against the door as snow-heavy
branches and black bridge beams orbit
    close. The rails slow. Stop. We nestle
next to the void. All air is sucked
    from the interior, the road empty. Brother
and I hold still, watch mother frozen
    motionless. Finally, anger awakens
her. She spins the tires, stalls in the snow
    drift, starts to curse. Brother begins to cry.
I think: I never want to ride, but also see
    the Snake River below, like a black string
stitched deep in an icy ditch, and I am still
    spinning, thrilled and sick.
In our fifth and seventh years, little brother and I were learning *the world ain’t no love embrace*—

from our father’s car stereo as we sped south *between redwoods to our grandparents’ farm.*

Later, I would hear *that jesus don’t want me for a sunbeam* and think of the sun shimmer

on my father’s rear window as he roared off in a cloud of red dust. But that day to we learned to feel

the grapes, walk long stripes of the leaf green landscape. Each time brother asked to go home

he learned to *buck-up*, as our grandfather told us. And each morning our grandfather woke before dawn,

like he did all his life as a soldier, to smoke a pipe, sit in his recliner under a mantle and his mounted rifle,

the red setter at his feet, while the dog waited for his slop and scraps. I always tried

to beat him to the den, but never could. I’d wake in a burgundy room to the sun

rising in his silver medals on the wall, often startled by the cow lowing by the window, or the cock crying.

I’d take my Lincoln logs and join the dog on the carpet. We respected each others’ silence. My Grandfather back

in his unspoken-of wars. The dog in his hopeful hunger. Me in my tiny wars. Repeating to myself: *Quiet*

*as it’s kept.* *Quiet as it’s kept.* Between those old cedar walls,
surrounded by horned animals and combed hills of grapes

for wine, my grandfather prayed that the weather
let the fruits mature, grow full, and only sweet enough

to suit their civilized purposes.
IN THE SPIN (IV)

I will pour out of my spirit all flesh, and your sons
and daughters will prophesy. Acts 2:17

Brother began speaking
just after father left, but only
I could understand. His language

was filled with liquid
as if a demon had infused
his tongue. He did not need
to listen well to mother
and her girlfriends out back
with their whiskey talking of men
to know he was marked. At mass
I heard him next to me
whispering the Lord’s Prayer. Weed

us not, he’d implore, and the priest
quoted God saying speak and I will bear. I hated the priest

for his lie, God for coming down
to confound Brother’s speech, Father
for how he shoved the wafer on his tongue,

and Mother for her virginal faultlessness,
her innocence, the crepuscular sheen
of her bowed head. But then gold light

streamed through the stained-glass head of a lamb, and the priest
spoke to me, saying *we cannot but speak*.

*the things which we have seen*

*and heard* and I knew it

would be so, and knew I would not

be delivered from evil, that I would be

*wed* into temptation. So I said

the Lord’s Prayer: *Hallowed be*

*thy name*, learned to scoop

out his name, as all words were

emptied within my brother’s mouth.

Then I began to hear the holy ghost

fall from him as *fall* became *far*,

and he taught me

the unutterable, how we were right
to pray: *Less us O*

*Word, hallowed be thy name.*
THE SIGNIFIED

The thing itself
    is lambent eyes of animals
caught in mechanic lights,

a creature without a mother-tongue to plead
for life in the sharpened night—
    even this

an axe ring on heartwood
    a chainsaw tear to bark blood
    a knife whisper to the wound

all order made with blades—
    as we speak out of skins

cheap and blank as flank meat.
IN THE SPIN (V)

After his girlfriend left, father found a cabin
infested with earwigs skittering on curling linoleum.
We sat on cracked black vinyl barstools to eat
poptarts and potpies. Now I know
how he fought himself there, fought
the long dock, sleeping pills and his .45
to stay alive among the foxes and rattlesnakes,
wondering: What is left? How he needed a midday
nap to regain composure, to face us, face
his no-longer-husband, no-longer-law-professor
self. But we still called out: Dad? Dad? so he’d know
the title was still his, we were still his. One day
we three crested the hill where the pine trees opened
and there grazed the mama bear with her cubs.
Seeing us, she rose up, her chestnut fur glistening.

Her young sniffed the air, waiting for her to act. Father
put his palm flat on my chest, whispered: Take
your brother. Back away slowly. Don’t turn to run

until I’m out of sight. No matter what you hear,
don’t come back. A low growl rose from her throat.
I grabbed my baby brother by the overall straps

and began to walk backward, keeping one eye
on the bear, one my father. Today I can still see him
facing that bear, how the tender back of his head

was so still, how he was alone.
MY GRANDMOTHER'S WEDDING NIGHT,
OR THE OLD THRESH AND GATHER

Fingerpress  
  over my neck veins slow the light

to bruised-apple-red  
as rotted

fruit falls  
  from your eyes.

And you carve  
the skin of our babes  
from the grain of my words.

So tonight, my swollen  
tongue already sings  
  with the post-bitter
  ache—

from a taste of  
this harvest—

  its blue skin
blackening into a lifelong
  gasp.

Please, step lightly  
  my love,

as now  
  my breath is yours

to husk down  
to the teeth,

strip down  
to the hush.
AN APOLOGY FOR MY FATHER

For all the times I

cursed your pipe,
-crashed your car,
-stole your .45.

Since it’s for you
-I drink neat,
-drive backwards,
-recite my rights,
-lay low.

Like your boat
-lays low between waves.

But waves beat the dust rising
-under wheels on summer road trips.

I’m sorry about my Trips.

And I’m sorry I was the one
-who told her about your lover,

since I know now what it’s like
-to climb up crumbing sandstone,
-to love a vaulted door.

I can’t blame you
-for refusing numb limbs,

since it’s from you I learned
-to rub the blood back in.
GALACTIC
Eulogy & Ars-poetica
For Mrs. Charles

_The tongue, even between the teeth, still manages to praise._
Rilke

We were a painful video game age and were both the teacher’s pets; but this was not your usual teacher and we were not the usual pets. She was ours, we loved her, and she was dying. This is all we knew.

I moved because of the volleyball coach, and what he did to me in the car. I had a new scream, a girl’s scream, trapped within the ribcage.

You had saved you mother from a man who would have killed her by beating him with a lead pipe. You had a scream too. There were at least three screams and hers led the chorus—so out of fidelity to our distress, designs arose.

The tumors spoke in out-of-control multiplications of meaning, like poems in a body hijacked by nonsense. When we weren’t writing poems, we were writing eulogies (our own).

So I ask her now that she’s gone:
_Why cry into these distances?_
_Why make stains only on this plane?_

Sometimes she answers me in dreams:
_Write to conjure the dead,_
_Write to conjure your own death,_
_Write to conjure yourself a life._

So it is for us that I ask:
_What does a chokehold smell like?_
_What does a lead pipe taste like?_
_What does a scar sound like?_
_How do our deaths tiptoe to us?_

She told me that now she can speak to me from the other side of the page. So I flip it over faster: Will you hear me when I’m gone? Will my scream reach far enough to make you grab
hold of a sound wave and ride it over the rift between us? Will I be galactic enough for galactic you?

So we write ghost babies for a ghost grandmother and for our own ghosts. We plant poems between the cabbages and the roses, water their tiny heads with grief. It is for all of us (the damaged) that the paper speaks. It asks us that no words be stillborn.

And so we labor.
IN THE SPIN (VI)

An early memory: Mother and I sit
on the back steps while Father swings
an axe overhead, brings it down

hard on the cedar. He looks like Paul
   Bunyan to me with his beard, boots,
   red-plaid shirt. I am reminded

of how I stood on the tall man’s boot
   once, at the Trees of Mystery, where
   each tree is twisted by storms,

or some root sickness—they don’t know
   which. It was windy there, and I wanted
   the giant with something like lust, so I let go

father’s hand, climbed the huge black
   boot, found a place where I could look down
at my family, almost lost among the others.
They riveted us between two extremes: the Medusa and the Abyss.

Helene Cixous
COUNT ME IN

I may be chanting
but not often

I may be bleeding
but not much

So you can go cango
down

there comic/strip lover,

and South I will also go
with my waxpaper heartwrapper.

And when you arrive
Count the almonds you blanch,
Count the things that kept you out,
Count me in.

(I look for you
and my eye opens your eardrum
and I find only soundless space)

And the coin on your tongue melts
And the skin on your palm peels off
FOR FAULKNER'S CADDY

All your little kindesses
rake my skin like nails

and I can't hear your voice
over the singing of his chainsaw.

I know someday the buzzards
will be the only ones to undress me

but I want my bones to
shine clean now.
Much against my will
I left the city of god where it belongs.
-Robert Lowell

And after your sleep-breath started
that night we bled on each other,

I watched a rusty leaf cluster
pinwheel in night wind.

At your family picnic, you and I
pick blackberries, a predator species.
Who are you? your grandmother asks.
Why so many? She tells me to go wash
my stained fingertips.

During the enlightenment, your father slurs,
teetering at the table, the hemophiliac
bled out before he could become a great scholar.

After lovemaking in your childhood
room, I whisper to you in dark:

Despite the evidence otherwise,
I do have my loyalties:

To our childhoods
To the outsider harvest
To the prick & stain

Your father continues outside your window—
The priest painted Caesar’s face with the blood of his enemy
before he stood to face the people of Rome . . .

*Who are you?* Your grandmother asks him.
*A good question mother,* your father responds loudly.

**iii.**

Japanese folktales learned from your wife:

Men must spend the day drinking under
raining petals when the cherry blooms fall.

When a man has a nosebleed in bed
he will seed a child in lust.

Never sleep with a bleeding woman or
she’ll have your heart for breakfast.
INARTICULATE

Between chilled sixpacks
and the sunsweat of intertube stick

we float on, although my pinprick hole is pierced
by indecision of where to sleep tonight—and every—

where I’m caught in the throat of the word
even as the root of my tongue ripens toward you like

riverside raspberries that have everything to do
with the root of this matter. And it is a matter

of silence that speaks, asking whether we will teach it to eat
in spaces that are not articulate or in the sun.

So we’ll spin a whirlpool of the name’s omission
where only in the solo citrus of evening

sun-numbed arms will row down
river and out, into a delta where we will

someday say without a sound, pray never to unstick
honeytasting tongues.
ON OPEN WATER

Night stalks the day
and time bawls back.

I learn a mouthful
of digits is a nightful,

and in the downpour
that is fully sounded

my knees knock like loose
barnacles on your shipside.

So dock here my digital one,
anchor and curl, purl and sound

with this girl who burns a moan
lives alone in her boat home,

presses her wide teeth
to your marbled bones

to close glutted gaps
that web between this
    and the word
    for this—

and if you want, you can call
it a fault
    of the greedy

You can say it’s
a groundspit
    for the landlocked,

or if you must, call it
only a split
    of tongues down a pulse.
ANTIPHON
(on not telling a lover of an unwanted pregnancy)

Ring of fire, the circus scene
of sluicing Choice. Whether
to dive and run through layers
of broken skin, or sink into a sea

of my own making. I have a space,
a space that’s a place and bile
is a strange flavor to start a birth.
There was singing or screaming

on the other side of my singular skin
when I woke next to him alone.
I wanted to say ‘terminate’
implicates the author

of an ending. ‘Expulsion’
implies an exodus of us.
Birds migrate to survive, just
as North to South a soul

flies in seconds. This question
does not exist in a vacuum although
it may involve one. Please don’t let him
open his eyes now, as I must answer

to only me. Someone will walk this plank
and won’t be.
CORDELIA'S LONG PAUSE

What shall Cordelia do? Love and be silent.
King Lear, Act I ; Sc 1

Some nights he offers her their home. He says love is free, and this can’t be contained. He claims his wife doesn’t mind Cordelia’s ghostlike visits. She wonders, why is his wife’s laundry, even her underwear, still hanging in the living room? Why do they keep Jack Daniel’s on the nightstand? Why don’t these stiff-haired herding dogs bark or bite me, the windowpanes fill with black fog, the wishing stones on the sill stand on end and spin?

~

When his wife is away at the farm, they slip into the stream they swam in as kids, but now they turn together like large stones, heavy in the rush. With her head underwater, Cordelia hears pebbles like champagne glasses clinking in the current. The river is all toast and applause, and she feels ashamed, as if something has misjudged her.

~

When they invite Cordelia over for dinner, she notes their house now smells like wet dogs, steaming rice. She imagines the sound of four work boots kicked against a wall each evening. They have become experts at growing garlic, the bulbs white and bulging even in the steep dark hillsides. Alone in the bathroom, Cordelia has the urge to search for something she left behind. A hair band or hand cream. A silver wishing stone perhaps, buried in the pile. Instead, she pulls a single black hair from his wife’s brush, ties it around her pinkie finger, returns to the table.

She finds it hard to listen to talk of weather, how many times one should wash sushi rice. She wonders at what she may have left there but knows that all she’s lost is a tiny curling sprout, neatly yanked out.

The wife discreetly leaves for the wine cellar while Cordelia slides the cash off the table from where it he sets it, right by the rice balls.

She tells him: Don’t worry, I’m fine. It was nothing, No Thing.

~
A few years pass after this supper. Then, the night sweats, soaking the sheets again and again until sleep is more like swimming, or laying in the brisk edge of surf.

She wakes feeling clean, light, and hopes this is a final uncursing, an unbecoming. Knows it is the withering of two tiny stalks.

~

Her dreams divide and multiply.

She dreams the child is blind with skin the color of acorn meat, arms limp as boiled leeks, hair like black seaweed. *We are all born to the world with bloody fists,* she thinks. But this one, this one finds only cold air. He reaches for a blank white sky and a flock of starlings lifts from a branch like a long black string.
BARBE-BLEUE

Like many of my men
you kept the bodies of women
in the basement. Stowed

somewhere between
grandmother’s wedding dress and
grandfather’s whip.

When you first dyed
your beard, you had the face
of Neptune as you washed over

me; a rough wave scraping
the shore.
     But soon it faded

to an eggshell blue, almost
delicate where the skin
showed through.

And when I found a bloody key-
hole, it was you who knelt before me—
     *Please*, you pleaded (lip trembling)

*not that door.*
TRIDENT

Corkscrew got her arm in the auger. There weren’t no lockout tag-out.
-unknown fisherman

Ten hour shift, twenty hour shift—they grow as long as the light. Each night I crawl into the gleaming machine, the insides of salmon hang in my hair.
Chopper, did you check the locks? I holler, the machine’s inner-walls echoing.
Pulling fish skin out of steel joints with pliers, I emerge baptized in blood and guts, skid on pink, smelling of sea and death, and think this is the killing floor.

*

The scent of Light Blue follows her everywhere—Designer Imposters must be for the filleters or fishermen. We girls joke it keeps the grizzlies back on the five a.m. walk to the fishhouse. On the line, she and I become friends, her guile so simple I find it sweet, but outside the cannery, I leave her alone like the others.

*

How well I learn to eat with my knife. And how I clutch it to me on the way to the late bonfire, as if a single blade could stop a ton of hungry muscle with claws. If the fish don’t come in, we walk to the dump to watch bears rummage. We scream and climb the water tower if one comes close. She is never invited on these adventures.

*

She’s assigned to my room, and I always have to shake her awake. Since there is so much sun, we let no light inside.

*

After her accident, I squat in icy ocean listening to waves until my insides ache. At sunset, bats swarm from their cold caves. Someone builds a fire and I crawl closer. We can’t go back to the women’s portable, won’t go to the fishhouse. When the coals die down, some animal lumbers up on heavy feet. Blessed, I lie still and sleep, dream of machines. At dawn, the fish still leap and glitter like nails.
It’s our first day, some months ago. Her blue sundress billows wide as she descends the ladder shrieking, drops into the boat that will take us across. Croatian fishermen clap for their bottle-blond goldilocks. I wonder if Bristol Bay is more of memory or forgetting, but soon see it is nothing but pink foam, salt spray and living shadows.

Scorned by the women, she turns to the men. I can’t count how many times I hold back her hair, try to get her to stay in for the night.

I still take my guilt down to the ocean, throw it in. It washes up at my feet with all the other refuse and rot. I walk in it.

My eyes are on the line like always, my hands in the fish. I hear her scream, the way it sounds like an animal, and I know. I know and I won’t look. I won’t look, don’t see her arm gone at the shoulder and neither do the other women. A filleter has to tell us later. She is screaming and I look away but run for Chopper. Chopper comes with the keys, but it is too late. There is no red button to push, no lock to unlock. An old Filipino man holds her head off the waterlogged floor. The machines are silent. The machines stop but she does not. She is not silent.

Because we do not know what to do, the girls go together to burn down the old fishhouse. I can see ocean foam through the floorboards. I stay inside until the fire comes close to the walls.
GOING UNDER AT THIRTY

Isn’t so much sheer heedlessness emblematic of desire?
C.K. Williams

You need to shoulder this, my mother said, as I shouldered pavement when handle lost hand, seat lost sit bones. Why do you always need to fling your bodies at things? As grind-bone is to arthritis, or walk-away is to gone, how can I explain that there is no sense to the sensuous and want is folded somewhere within? That my bones want to fly loose from their taut tendon strings? How can I explain I was more afraid of not falling than this inevitable ache?

To strike and be struck, to fuck and be fucked: all learning is interpenetrating (I enter you, you enter me). A man once told me to actively and passively participate in being. Still, seeds sprout and wither, things snap loose forever—

and there is an outcome to every night of laying down, of riding too fast in the rain. How could I know if I Am if I don’t live in every last bit of my flesh? But the facts remain: some deeds aren’t undone and I will have to keep that mantra, the one from the intersection where I skidded from the motorcycle, river of headlights a blackness and brilliance all around me. Curled between lanes, repeating mother, mother, mother. Mother, you warned me the pain would get keener. I didn’t know that the doctor, my lover, my God, would have to open me up, take his tools to my insides, stop me from rubbing so acutely. Beforehand, I always ask the wrong questions: Can you take me apart, put me back together again?
MILES

Last night I sat on the dark
dock shivering in wool, with
a cigarette, glass of wine, and Miles
Davis reminding me of everything

at once each time he left
the melody. I could smell a bonfire
in the direction of the red moon rising,
I could smell a storm coming, hear

leaves slap and break like ice
on a windowpane. Inhalng the cold,
my burned fingers dragging the ground,
my mouth remembered hunger

and a cry with no answer. My legs
remembered trying to unfold an ache
that could bend the night.
I love you more than one more day.

Joan Didion
BLUE NOTE FROM THE HONEY JAR

Even for you, I can play no perfect passingnote, 
so instead try to speak in a jawbreaking 
bluenote sound.

But I’m silenced by your sledgehammer song 
that love-kicks me harder 
than twins through this belly wall

and like such inchoates, we too 
listen for the heartpulse, 
we breathe through amniotic seas, 
we turn toward the music on the other side 
of our singular skins.

From here we can hear mothers sing 
about the sharpness in each new inhale, 
about a time we will swim, 
about an escape from this honey jar.

So let us try not to fear the laboring day 
when we learn how air 
can sever a shared chord.
I.

Look, she said to no one, at the wind,
they roses are all bending,
and the cherry, and each blade
of grass is bowing—

That morning
there was a storm.
The horses stomped and neighed
and bit each other's flanks.

She went to the window.
He went to the bedroom
to watch the weather channel.

On its foundation the frame
had shifted
toward the cliff side before
the lovers returned
from their honeymoon.

This first night home
she dreamt
of a snake
he dreamt
of her dying—

II.

Unfortunately, thinking
often confuses
and leads toward
lost distinctions if
one starts to realize
there may have been
someone or something
one was meant
to do or to love.

III.

So if that woman,
alone at the window,
cried out for herself,
did she still make
a sound?

IV.

One can always listen
for a humming that suggests
someone may be listening.

Even if the buzz is nothing
but an empty line, it’s a recording of what,
at one time, may have been a voice
V.

But the fact remains that
The heart is a lonely
word.
   A rude word.

A cross
between a crown (coronary)
and a bloody fist.

VI.

   When I close my eyes
underwater, there is a pulse singing:

Heart    land, Heart    Land, Heart    Land.

I must have a spondaic heart.

VII.

   Cordial is “for the heart” as in
a drink (overly sweet) or
politeness to strangers.

Concorde = “with heart” or
to be tied with a cord.

A cockle is a mollusk, so a cockle
of your heart is a mollusk of your heart.

Warming the cockles—
   sizzling the sea.

VIII.

And we must return
to the sweethearts, a term

of endearment once referring
strictly to labor contractions.
Sweetheart=birth pain,
sweethearts caused by sweethearts,

IX.

(And, sweetheart, you’d better know which one’s to blame)

X.

Consider: bicuspid= valve of the heart
or a tooth (the sharpest)

We share these teeth
with Canines (obedient,
live in packs) and
felines (liars, really
and quite solitary)—

so apparently, any tooth
can be sweet (think
caramel and nape
of the neck) or cruel
in its attack capabilities.

XI.

Celan: “My eyes root for you
in the crown-land bitten
bright by the heart-teeth.”

So Cuspid=
Cusp=
Cusping (not a word
but a way to pray)

And cusp implies something pointed,
a prick or a punctum. (Punctum also means
the stage when a fetus develops heart.)
XII.

And this brings us back to the point, which implies a point of view.

And this point is already beside itself, but the view belongs to the woman at the beginning, who reached for a fruit that reminded her hands how to ache, and also dreamt of a snake.

And so she, (who is me), went back to bed with her man, and although they did not make love that night, she wound her limbs all around him and wondered if they were waking or falling further to sleep.
NATURE SHOW

The house was built by the man who lived there and the furniture was from the seventies. There was a china hutch, a wardrobe, and a brown beaded lamp. There was a truck and a trailer on wooded land, a garage stacked with rusted tools, and a woman in the kitchen, baking to save her own life. The man lay in the bedroom, unable to ask for forgiveness, as his hands were dead months ago. All he wanted in his final days was to watch the nature channel. He had already accepted Jesus into his heart, so now he was free to enjoy rodents and strange sea life, as she’d set down the bible. He remembered how after the pastor left, there had been cheesecake with his last dinner, and she allowed him a coffee. Now his food was fed directly to his gut.

Sunday was our day. My husband sat with his father trying to make a language of the eyeball, of squint and blink. I held a limp hand between my fingers, played with his knuckles like prayer beads, watched fire ants decimate a landscape in minutes. I could feel in his fingers how he hated my pity. When he could still stand, he had taken his son to the shed, pointed at the shotgun. First, he ordered. Then, he begged. While his father spoke, my husband stared at his toes and wiggled them to make sure they worked. He shook his head back and forth, like the pendulum clock on the mantle, remembering the barrel of that gun in his mother’s face, shoved in his brother’s ribs.

Just after his son’s thirty-third birthday, the man woke to blue wallpaper. On it was a framed photo of the boy by the river, skipping rocks, the sun shining in his shaggy blonde hair. He realized he could no longer breathe; so he bit his tongue until it bled, bit the button that would summon his wife one last time. As his body worked for air, he rocked from the waist as if to swing his axe, hammer the hardest nail. Everyone came to see for themselves. When shots of morphine were administered, all five of his children went to the kitchen to eat cake and leave him to his final struggles. He turned toward me and blinked hard, so I stayed with him. I told him people are weak in their grief, said his life was not waste. Tears smeared his ashen face, but in anger or gratitude, I will never know.
I drive back alone after the morning service, watch from the window while father shoots her white doves, one by one. I watch as the feathers and the red and the pink stupor of dawn spreads over the pine-strewn field.

The facts come singsong: mother gone, father going, brother crawling inside a curled spoon.

The creek, I know, must be drying up, the mud wasps swarming. Dad strides in, walks out the front door, gets in the truck. I run out, climb in next to him.

I hold my hand into the wind and dust made by his speeding. The yellow Chevy shimmies down the dirt road to the river and I can smell the old coffee and whiskey in his 4-H mug. I always won 4-H prizes for my potatoes and beets. It was dad taught me to grow potatoes, but mom was the one taught me about the animals.

Seeing the first blue bend of the north fork, I recall driving my new wife down this road years ago. We camped and did yoga and made love on the sandbar. She’s gone now, couldn’t take this legacy, all the cheap vodka and grief.

The truck skids in sand. Father grabs the shotgun from the rack and stands on the edge of the Nooksak. I get out but stand back, watch while he holds the gun over his head like a victorious soldier or a man signaling a heli. Legs spread for balance, he rears back from the waist and hurls the gun into green glacial water.
A loaded gun in the river. I can’t get the phrase out of my mind. A loaded gun in the river. A loaded gun Absence speaks louder than

Somehow, my father’s anguished pose reminds me of lovemaking. I feel a shriek rising. I keep it down but my brain starts up again—Snatched. Snatched from us. Her snatch to which I long to return. Her snatch from whence I came. I worry my mind is going. Please show me to the lifeboat, I pray. All my loves have turned to water.

The heat waves on the sandbar are two bodies writhing. It’s too cold for heat waves. Father wades into the river up to his thighs.

I kneel down and begin poking black coals with a small stick. I wish you a pile of black sticks, I whisper to my missing wife who I can almost see sitting nude out in the middle of the rushing river.

I look up and father is standing in the current, but staring into the treetops. An eagle is dropping salmon guts from her nest, splattering on the shore from a hundred feet.

A loaded gun in the riverbed. Guts in the sand. I need a woman for shrieking. I whisper. No man could make such a sound.
DERRIDA'S DEATH

Push hard to be this lonely
and don’t give a fuck about the perfect paragraph.

Instead, pack them with mixed metaphors
like my Gypsy grandmother’s:

*Never look a stuck pig in the mouth and
and always skin two cats with one stone.*

Throw paragraphs like stones at armed
attackers, make squidlike anti-violence, make

your losses speak in senseless
tongues to remind someone

of a boy who wakes to his mother’s
moan, or a girl who wakes alone

in her inky darkness. Listen hard
to hear the inhale before each utterance.

Look into the distances we each day blacken
and banish with the search for a white word

in a penultimate white world
where each letter is already owned and broken.
QUICKEN

How strongly
you swing now,
   my dangerous
dangling star—

in your womb draped in red, closing-in
on collapsing tapestries of filigreed flesh.

And through this fisheye, skintaught, gasping
sea of painpoints

I remember that
mis
implies one could
carry
   well.

(We miss so much
but we carry even more…)

   So I listen for the shaky rebirth
of this belly’s heart beat
   stutter to a stop

while I’m powerless to keep
   my lungs from filling…

(breath   breath   breathe)

   yours from falling…

But even as you go
   O tiny fish—

I inhale
   each sharpened
nail with which you glitter.
FOR WHATEVER I'VE DONE

A double cento: Faulkner/Shakespeare

Act I

Let’s remember the beginning, to start from stopping:

First their was a veil like shining wind
(Cruel fate in 8lbs of silk)
I said

And I said

*I’ll do, I’ll do and I’ll do
and bind us further to you*

***

How close we lay to the bones
and how the shadows lay flat to the river,
held up ‘til dawn and all

*that evil lacks in itself.*

What did it look like
It smelled like trees
*And Roses, not virgins like dogwood, milkweed*

But the cake was furious,

*We thought we still owned the pasture*

Thought there was luck in a name

*Thought we could get some sleep*

We were wanton in our fullness

Yes

That’s how it was

*He looked at me and gave over*

(I died for her again and again.)
Act 2

But from the Spring where comfort seems to come, discomfort swells . . .

But my knife—I dropped it. Fell in the ditch. If she’d had wings. But it was only a train diminishing without progress, like honeysuckle cloying, like clasping a cooling loaf of bread.

He would have been the child of mine old age, *three months the rain was sweet*. All things rushing

A light in my hands was locked Two moons balanced

But the fire in my mouth, a loss I saw it too

Bones rounding out of a ditch Good Saint Francis—

Then my shadow leaning flat We found death in the Salt licks

My red barn empty again and again All was poisoned

You still lay close to my bones But couldn’t smell the trees anymore

That boy, that little sister death That never had a sister. Only a walking shadow. No luck in a name a pasture (no use an empty barn.)

Just a tale told and told, so I brought out the bottle, reached the ditch the belt came out the whip but no headaches allowed on her time.

What to do But betray in deepest consequence:
Act 3

I wish you were dead

What is it

Whore Whore

Listen, don’t take it so hard

Robbery

These are the wages of sin

Damn the honeysuckle

I . . .

***

She was motionless hard unyielding

(I am stronger than him
whimpering and moaning
for those swans; for a gold band
knuckle by blue knuckle)

***

Very frankly he confessed his treason:

You didn’t let her you didn’t

my blood or her blood

yes like dancing sitting down

but your barn, vacant with horses—

Do you know [you] were a man on whom I built an absolute trust?

***

What could I say: my Lord we are in a mess now,

Get Up? But I just bake a cake, count every egg.

She was waiting for a sign

but I was a treadmill, I was offstage . . .

So milk for gall pall thee in the dunnest smokes of hell:
I'll stand on my shadow leaning flat
I'll run away, never come back

***
So something had untied itself

A child not born
It was nothing just sound
Like a bellow
For an empty barn
And for whatever I’ve done
Or Saint Francis’
The heavy ripples going nowhere

Sound like a headache
Singing louder yet fading
For a pasture sold
A name unnamed
It’s god’s fault
Blame the train, the treadmill,

He screamed empty and I was trying to say

all is but toys and renown and grace are dead.
My thoughts cross the country to all the lived-in white sailboats
back home in the harbor, socked in with fog, their little lights
burning long after the Northern afternoon early winter dark,
to those who spend all night talking in small spaces, the sound
of the water slapping the deck side, the dog curled in the hull,
the aroma of salt, to that little green patch in the wide blue
water scooping out my home state with ocean, peninsula of old
growth and emerald city flanking the island where I grew up,
populated by old hippies and home-schooled children, where
almost everyone is on the land trust, the anti-bridge brigade,
and at the center of the land mass, where my brother and I played
in the pines, there a tire on a rope still swings at the axis
of the island, and the old bicycle grown into the limbs of a tree,
engulfed by the trunk, grown up to head level, as if being
re-imagined from machine to organism. And today, in this East
coast rain, I feel like I’m back there in that innocent and insular
oasis, where we are raised to resist all that would split
us the way I can almost see the Olympic mountains this evening
in the seams of this split and splitting eastern city, its boarded-up
windows unblinking, the streets stitched down into the gulfs
between high rises; and yet even back home we lived among remnants,
although not the exit wounds of slavery so much as of a great plague,
remember one Lummi man, his face scarred with rage, raving down
the street each morning, until he was inside the shop where I worked,
bought a coffee each morning at six for ninety-eight cents, after
I cut the tax, since he couldn’t spare more than the dollar he’d
begged with his bow and arrow still strapped to his back, his “original warrior
artwork” etched on the skin case, and wondered how he could resist
reaching for an arrow, angling feathers back into the taut string
of deer tendon, taking aim—but where could he aim? At some teller
at the bank, or a counselor at the Vet center? Maybe the option was
enough, the arrows always on his back somehow comforting, as I’m
comforted now by how I once called myself a radical, clandestinely planned
a tear-gassed march on our city as if there was still somewhere
to aim, as if no one was tired of protest in the streets, as if the draft
were still on. But now I forget to believe at all, my mind grown still
as the gold lull inside the brownstones on the Westside, glowing
in the blue hour as the sun drops like a slow bomb into downtown,
full of black folks there now by night, the day’s white exodus near-
complete, and tonight I walk toward the center of this city in the drizzle
until I see the signs, street art, small autonomous zones, block
prints on found plywood renderings of birds: blues, cardinals, black swallows, with bits of poetry etched below, dark swallow, between grief and nothing, I'll take grief; and I am filled with delight at these bits of unexpected beauty, but as I walk closer to downtown see another has, in cartoonish bubble font, tagged fag across each of these little bits of wood, so carefully bolted to bus stops and traffic signs, and I wonder if the word is earned in the art-making or the politics, if the urge toward beauty or justice is what elicits this slur for boys who are overly earnest, or worse, feminine, even extra-sexual—if wanting to love one’s own kind is to be fag, to not want only to deliver a pounding but to dream of receiving the other body into one’s own, as only women are cursed to do—and fag must be a thing wholly other, the urge toward love and transgression in one, as only a modern abraxas like each of these tall dark drag queens could want, strutting down this trash-strewn street, collapsing their art into a single act, where they become both driven down and triumphant, and as I wave back to one such in her hot pink mini and stilettos, know I could never live up to that, and not nostalgia but bile rises in my throat for all our bought utopias and I backhand a beer bottle out of a holly bush where it’s wedged, the glass shattering in an act like all my small acts of puerile rage, wonder if I did it because I thought it was ugly or somehow a sign of what’s gone wrong, realize I rarely know upon which urge to act, wonder if beauty’s complexities can bring only transient bliss or existential despair, but know my children can never stand on that.
BONEFIRE

Bonfire, in Middle English, is “bone fire”—a fire in which bones were burned. The French mistook “bon” for their word meaning good, a fire around which to celebrate.

Just before dawn orange-tints this field, the men take charge, blindfold the woman and gather everyone under a catalpa. It is the thirtieth birthday of our friend, the only black woman at this gathering. She’s ordered to beat the piñata shaped like a pirate. They call him Moses, after her despised ex, so she aims for arms, legs, the groin, as we yell: Swing harder and Aim for his head!

She swings faster and everyone is yelling Yeah, that’s it, get him! She lands a blow that sounds like a thud, and then the wonder of the thing—starbursts, lollipops, everyone scrambling. Our friend, still blindfolded, leaps back when everything starts spilling, she tears the blindfold back.

Over at the bonfire, a marshmallow falls from the whittled end of a stick, shrinks into black ash. I smell sweet smoke, watch a man leap to his feet, shake loose an ember.

Gathered again by the fire, we are no longer so young from our scrambling but intent on our S’mores, still unable to see the sticky on our fingers or a deflated silhouette still swinging just outside the light.

*

Tonight my lover is at the downtown hospital. Someone is speaking in his ear as he learns to pack a wound that refuses to heal. The boy’s mother screams about the one who shot her son, swearing to kill him, and my man is sent to remove her from the room.
Sunday we go to the fair—first to the midway to feel the body in free fall, spun sugar on the tongue, a view from above. Then to see the whip guy give his show. For the final act, he asks for a volunteer, and what seems like the only black man in this crowd walks into the arena. He’s asked to hold a daisy on his head, one behind his back, another with his lips. This is the finale. Two white men behind us in the bleachers begin to snigger, one says *that’ll show the nigger*, and I spin to face them, but my man puts a hand on my wrist, warns me not to make a scene. The man stands long enough that I can see the shadow of the cattle barn crawl up his back. Finally, the flowers are snapped from the his hands, from between his teeth.

*I walk past a black church in a white neighborhood.  
Women in white hats gather like huge ibisis. One mother is moaning over the casket of her man-child. I stop, stand transfixed, staring through the church doors as she reaches toward where his head is, his young face. I think perhaps she remembers a time when he trusted her absolutely, or a night when he had a nightmare, crawled into her bed. I suddenly feel dirty—looking for a jolt from this live wire, not mine, so I walk on, pass a man sitting in his truck, hear Skip James, just audible through his cracked window. The man leans hard on the wheel, stares out at the street, dimming*
into a dead canal of pillared homes.

Down the block, the college kids
are sitting outside Buddy’s Bar.

None of them notice the wailing,
the music. A drunk boy backhands

his friend, sloshes beer on his
lap, laughs loudly. Half a block
down the street. It is the same
street, the same damn

street, miles and miles away.

*

When she swings
the bat, when he snaps
the whip, when
the mother wails, I am walked
through the remnants
of our aftermath. Inside
the dark of my skull, the past
is a Russian doll, all children
within children
within children.
THROMBOSIS

Heartcolor
   late strawberry, wither and rust
Veins
   untrammelled pathways, lacking word-furrows
Skinlayer
   translucent webbing, through the flesh we see
Ribcage
   mere shadowbars, expose the pulsing
Blood
   like sap but thinner, the Body

multilingual as water,
as dying cells burn brighter
   than an empty cell to lie in

without flesh to chew
or a blanket worn through
or a life sentence
   with no cellmate

So we carve heartwalls with
   fragments of refracting names
   failing as syntax fails

as we fail each other.
FOR FAULKNER’S QUENTIN

My father’s wood clock knocks against my hung-over head this morning, and I wake without knowing where I am, forgetting I’m somebody’s sister, someone who never had a sister, can think only of the parade of time passing by in every tick and tock, the sounds growing and diminishing, and I wonder at the tiny wheels there, how all my will can’t stop them, wonder, how could I be here and not there anymore?

In half sleep, relics of my dreams return: a man in a house and I go blind, a square stone hole, filled with water, made to hold my body, the body of any woman, and I look up to see my grandmother’s farmhouse painting on the wall, badly rendered, roof and fence falling down in the foreground, but the sky is right, hazy, and the straw sticks on arid ground are right too, and I long to walk in there, up that dry yellow path to the red door, slid open for the animals to come and go.

She likely thought she could see it all as it was, accepting it as such, just this same sky, the same dry dirt ground—just tried to be true to the tall pine there, the right red for the clapboards, but I think I see a gap where one couldn’t be in a tree trunk, a window frame not fully formed and wonder if it would be impossible and beautiful there, if it would feel safe or suffocating, if the sticks would snap cleanly beneath my feet or if I’d float over unchanging ground, fix my gaze on the permanent haze of late afternoon. The phone rings.

It’s mother: they had to pull your grandmother off the ground, a bleed in the brain, pulled her by the arm it’s dislocated, out-of-joint, and they can’t put it back, can’t put her under. Under, I think, and remember Jung said dreams are the basement of the mind, she’s out-of-joint, like Macbeth said about time, after what could not be undone. My arm aches deeper, so I hang up, lay in bed with icepacks while my grandmother is driven downtown, intubated, bleeds again from the brain, finally goes under for good.

She told my mother last night to remind me to be safe. Safe, as if I could enter the farmhouse of her imagination, hold there eternally. The ache in my shoulder moves up my neck, takes hold in my head until the world is dimming, brightening, until the tick of the clock enters there echoing like a great gong, until the phone rings again: They carried her out

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already. Soon we’ll have to carry out her books, her paintings.

The boxes will sound like coffins coming down the stairs. *How was the doctor?* she asks and I tell her he said I’d have to go under again, that the bone will have to be removed. I don’t tell her how I wanted to say *Wait, Wait, time is not my fault,* and how I dreamt last night again of the water caskets, of women and time, of liquid purification, of all that drowns in ancient aquifers, in basements, in Anymore, in Here and There.
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Awards and Honors

Susan E. Kennedy Scholarship, awarded for the promotion of women in higher education, Phi Beta Kappa (2008)

Editor's Choice Award in Nonfiction, finalist Drunken Boat Magazine (2008)

Milton Kessler Memorial Prize in Poetry, finalist (2007)

Graduate Nonfiction Award, VCU, finalist (2007)

First year Creative Writing Fellowship awarded at VCU (2006-07)

Tom Howard Poetry Prize, finalist (2005)

“Pass with Distinction” awarded for graduate exam in poetics, WWU, (2005)

Ross Travel Grant, to give an academic paper CCC conference, ASU, 2005

AWP Intro Journals Project, nonfiction nomination (2006)

Publications


Poem entitled “Quicken,” Harpur Palate, 2006


Poem entitled “Counting Down,” Harpur Palate, 2005

Poem entitled “Flesh, Fall,” Touchstone, 2005

Poem entitled “My Grandmother’s Wedding Night or the Old Thresh and Gather” Harpur Palate, 2006


Service to University

Elected President of Graduate Writer’s Association, VCU 2006-07


Read for the 49th Parallel Poetry Award for the Bellingham Review (2005)

Served on two hiring committees at Virginia Commonwealth University (2007-08)

Academic Papers

Gave paper entitled “Writing to Power: Academic Genres and the Negotiation Between Assimilation and Critique” at Arizona State University’s, “Big Rhetorics, Small Literacies” conference, 2004

Gave paper entitled “The Danger of the Mother-Debt in Leslie Marmon Silko’s Almanac of the Dead,” University of Washington Conference, 2005

Paper accepted (insufficient funds to attend) entitled “Ethnography and Imagination in E.M. Forster’s A Passage to India,” Hawaii International Conference on Social Sciences, 2004