

Lipizzan Stallions

Poetry by

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For Emily Jensen, Darby Lewes, and Jane Keller, the women who raised
my words.

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I

Kilmacduagh, South Galway

When the Irish paged through history
they stopped only for the pictures,
tearing art out of space and time,
a collage of Mediterranean wonders
pasted together with North Atlantic spray:

St. Brendan's arched doorway and Gothic windows
formed by the pressure of Roman against Romantic.
Solid stonewalls with useless Doric columns.
A round Norman tower with a Pisa slant
never to be tested by trembling volcanoes.

Few signs of classical sculpture—
no curves of rippling Venus, stately Athene,
no playful Puck or tender naked Faun—
though perhaps they're present and unseen,
concealed in obvious architecture.

I enter the church through the curve of hips
as sunlight penetrates Virgin stained glass,
a distant tower resting on the shoulder of the horizon.
The touch of stone dampens my hair as I pass
between two pairs of synchronous, heaving ribs.

Holy infant and hanging corpse shrouded in modest
cloth, miniature Saint Patrick and Columcille laden
with vestments—remnants of Christian censorship.
But the Church itself becomes the Erin
nude that bears the body of Christ.

Man of Aran: 1934 Documentary

The Celts had no god of thunder
 so O'Flaherty tried to create one on film:
 Colin O'Shea, the local fisherman, was hired
 to drive nonexistent farmland
 out of the pores of limestone
 and pretend to conquer the elements.

His poverty was worse than the elements:
 harsher than the wind, the Atlantic's thunder.
 For swinging a sledgehammer at fake stone
 made real by rain-blurred film
 he earned the punts to keep his land,
 as the mainlander's rent grew higher.

Shot against the backdrop of high
 tide, he is the central element,
 the Man, the conqueror of the land,
 worthy of trumpets and cymbal thunder.
 But his wife earns only minutes of film
 as she grows potatoes on a ledge of stone.

When fishing fails, her crops become keystones
 of life. Wielding magical seaweed like the goddess Airmid,
 coating desperate roots in an iodine film,
 the chemical equation yielding gentler elements.
 Under the threat of brewing thunder,
 she spreads a patchwork quilt over the land.

One leaf of windtorn seaweed lands
 on her red cloak, pigment ground with a stone,
 dye pots spilling with each shake of thunder,
 hours combing wool for whoever will hire.
 No sooner woven, it's thrown to the elements,
 stained by the ocean's salty foam.

The day Cu Chulann died, he saw a film
of blood in the streams of his homeland—
his own, he knew, the Sidhe's prophetic element.
Turn back, they whispered, and enchanted stones
blocked the wheels of his gilded *caothair*.
But he had no fear, and on he thundered

through battle's misty film. He died on foot, a standing stone.
The raven goddess Morrigan bore him high over patched land,
her wings an elemental shield against the thunder.

Castrati

Let your women keep silent in the churches--1 Corinthians 14:34

Not satisfied with book descriptions and film tricks, a soprano dubbed over a tenor, I download Alessandro Moreschi, the last *castrato*, and hear a 200-pound woman, operatic stereotype, swallowing an angel that never stops crying out, exquisite pain boring into early shellac records, tempered only by the tin foil crackles of age: a leftover from a time when religion was the opposite of compassion and listeners were ignorant of the instrument's tuning.

Thanks to Paul, directors of the Sistine Chapel choir needed boys to sing soprano but soon found talent beyond prepubescent lungs and falsetto palates. Men castrated in youth before their throats broadened with their shoulders: farm boys their families couldn't afford to feed. An imaginary attack by wild boar to justify the operation, opium and a child's first warm bath.

Performing parts Mozart, Handel, and Rossini designed for them, rock icons of the Baroque age, their lack of testosterone left fatty lumps on hips and thighs, chests covered in a dozen boil-sized breasts, towering height from long bones that never got the message to stop growing. Denied families or hereditary titles, they sought prostitutes of either sex, driven by nonexistent hormones.

Field Trip to the Met

The high school art teacher snickers
at O'Keeffe's pelvic bones:
"She never did have children."
Labial folds of orchid petals. "Not just a flower,
if you know what I mean."
Early abstracts of soft, pink chasms.
"Do I need to spell it out?"

No one brings Freud to the Renaissance:
no oral fixations in Da Vinci's suckling
Christ, or Raphael lusting after angelic boys;
he only gave them wings. Between ninth grade
and a bachelor's degree, we learn the lesson well:
A woman's painted flowers are all vaginas,
but in men's art, vaginas are about God.

Judith Slaying Holofernes

—After a Painting by Artemisia Gentileschi

Embroidered gold sleeves rolled up, she doesn't chop
but savors the general's neck as if to savor the pain,
blood not spurting far enough to reach her corseted breasts.

Agostino Tassi painted Artemisia an "insatiable whore"
in the seven-month trial for her honor, claimed
he only meant to teach her rudimentary perspective

but she wanted more. Ten years later, Holofernes's arms
and legs flail in the depth of Judith's thrusts, fleshy women
emerging from a dimension all their own to save Israel.

More terrifying than an Assyrian's tent, the screens
erected in the court room, the shadows of midwives
probing for virginity and testifying that she gave it freely.

Torture with thumbscrews didn't change her story,
but the vice grip of a Hebrew maidservant is a tool
for her heroine, leverage to break through bone.

Tassi only went to prison for a year
but for three centuries he's writhed, a biblical enemy
in scarlet whore's cloth and stained sheets.

Replacement

Oliver buckles the anaesthetizing eye hood
 over the falcon's yellow-rimmed, black pools
 as her bamboo-tough talons release the hand
 he extends, palm up, to receive surgical instruments:
 betadine swab, three-toothed segment from a flea comb
 to guide damaged feathers back into the weave.
 It was my fault, my first hunt when I flushed a crow

through the trees to a sheep pasture. My falcon
 pursued her prey into barbed wire: a pained warble
 like a rapidly rolled R, a wing that never healed,
 tipping her wildly when she tried to glide.
 Oliver wouldn't meet my gaze until I found
 the carcass of an eagle scorched by frayed power lines
 and showed him intact feathers, hopeful. A week

soaking in liquefied pig fat to enliven the quills, static
 from a magnet run through a toaster coil to draw
 the wrinkled barbs upright and now the transplant
 like the final breathless touch to a ship in a bottle:
 golden brown falling into place among peregrine gray,
 an imperfect aesthetic to produce an aerodynamic wonder.
 Inside the house, Lydia sorts insurance forms

and pills, shifting the prosthetic padding in her bra
 before a mirror framed in polaroids of osprey chicks
 from an abandoned nest she'd helped her husband nurse.
 Two years of radiation and scars. He spends his time
 manipulating blinders, turning to a teenaged apprentice
 and raptors with creamy, speckled breasts, not seeing
 the holes where he has failed to tenderly restore flight.

Eclipse

At the monthly Esbat, I clear my life
 from artificial calendar blocks, answer officers
 patrolling the park at midnight, and stumble
 into class with too little sleep, all to offer
 milk and almond cakes to the Great Mother,
 my Goddess whose power rises with the full moon.

May 15, the eclipse—no ritual for this.
 Tradition speaks in hushed tones about
 a Goddess falling into shadow, how
 anything can happen. And I'm nervous—it's 2003—
 I'm unable not to watch what I don't want to see.

Diana is mistress of other cycles, guiding oceans
 and the tides of tissue preparing for a fullness of life
 I consciously delay, gathering only to dispel.
 When my cycles stopped, I took the test
 I knew would be negative, waited, then enjoyed
 my holiday from migraines, cramps, and stains.

Three months of pamphlets on endometriosis,
 diagrams of ovarian cysts, freakish tales of early menopause
 and brittle bones. All through the ultrasound, I strained
 to sit up to see the screen, but the nurse pushed me back:
Lie still or you'll blur the images. Of what?

Thick clouds blocked my view of the moon
 or lack of it, a space beyond my understanding,
 like my invisible womb, either a slender maiden's
 crescent or the pale slice of a waning crone.
 I had to know which. If I'd seen the sonic ghost
 of my uterus, it would've been anything but normal.

Five hormone cocktails and a ritual with black currants
brought my cycle back after ninth months. Another full moon
and I see my wavering reflection in the cauldron's
water and rosehips, feel every shooting pain, thank the Goddess
for knowing when and when not to shield me from myself.

Lipizzan Stallions

Hand me the—whatever that eyelash stuff is called.

Backstage at a charity benefit drag show,
I stand at the junction between women stomping
in baggy jeans, men tripping over high heels.

I hand Jen the mascara for her goatee,
bind Amber in barely elastic vet wrap,
descend through the alphabet of bra sizes
until we achieve relative flatness, and fasten

Jim's girdle as though tightening a horse's girth.
I prefer a mare who only pins her ears,
but my human victim punctuates his grumbles with grunts:
How did I ever get, oof, talked into this?

I am only an assistant, but one person says,
You know, man, that wig looks pretty fake,
five minutes before someone else says,
Wow, you got the slouching and the low voice pegged.

I need no costumes to confuse people; I can impersonate
both genders at the same time, equally badly.
As long ago as third grade, I questioned
whether zebras were black with white

stripes or white with black:

It's doesn't matter, just do your math.

White Lipizzan stallions are as exotic as zebras,
trained to rear on command and dance equine ballet.

They're born black and grow into pure ivory coats,
all but the rare colts whose genes don't add up.

They're forever speckled gray, black manes, white roots,
smudged flanks that stable grooms never stop brushing.

Merlin's Woman

My father died in battle against the King,
 My mother on his corpse in open field;
 She bore me there, for born from death was I
 Among the dead and sown upon the wind
 —Alfred Lord Tennyson “Merlin and Vivian”

I. *Lightning Frightens Vivien*

—After G.W. and L. Rhead, 1898

Before legend labeled me temptress, witch, betrayer
 of Camelot's architect, I was a girl seeking comfort
 in an old man's arms. Delivering the abbot's gold
 to court, I stumbled, spilling heavy coins,
 the sack's holy emblem not enough to deter
 raw hands and toothless sneers of the hungry.

I knew I wouldn't make the gates, gray battlements
 as distant as thickening clouds. But a crash scattered beggars
 like leaves. Then, the folds of his cloak swallowing my screams.
 His outstretched hand halted lightning in mid-strike,
 one bolt etching his profile in the sky. I didn't know the mark
 of a man who lived to conjure storms and blind women.

II. *Merlin and Vivien*

—After G.W. and L. Rhead, 1898

Shielded once again, this time from waves
 off the coast of Avalon, each one a pair of icy jaws
 gnawing wreckage from voyages a wizard hadn't overseen:
 A pilgrimage to Joseph of Arimethea's isle.
 What village priest or widowed father of twelve wouldn't
 bless a girl bound for a nunnery?

No rest beneath the boat's creaking canopy.
 My head swims in my hand, and I feel the damp, red welts
 from a gown too small—not made for me—adorned
 in peacock. A giant seagull with a man's head
 (I'm certain I'm only dreaming) says I'm more beautiful
 than the last, before my lover snaps its neck.

III. *Merlin and Vivien*

—After Eleanor Fortesque-Brickdale, 1911

I gather fruit from trees thick and knotted with age.
 I ask him to make the crabapples sweet again,
 but he's envisioning two dragons, a white one
 bleeding from a red's bite, and a table with no corners
 growing from an oak untouched by axe or chisel.
 He says I wouldn't understand.

I toy with his beard, but he's still as the oak
 at my back. A glance, but only for my new green dress
 embroidered to match ivy and ferns, mere scenery
 for a wizard brooding over holy wars. I lift a silver strand
 closest to his lips and touch my breast:
 softer than fabric, gentler than his hands.

IV. *The Beguiling of Merlin*

—After Edmund Burne-Jones, c1890

We walk through a grove of lilacs: my favorite,
 and a gesture turns green to purple satin
 clinging to my legs like wet petals. He says all flowers
 need the sun and leads me to a clearing. He desires
 noon light, musty books. I hope for a breeze
 but the air is heavy with the turn of tattered pages.

Eyes glazed from the strain of faded ink, he's left
 his body behind, traveling across jagged mounds of thought.
 In his trance, the book drops from his hand into mine:
 spells and charms, perhaps, in runes I cannot understand.
 No Latin bars or curves, only fleeting strokes, but I feel
 the pattern's rhythm like the murmurs of a dying heart.

V. *Vivien's Spell*

—After G.W. and L. Rhead, 1898

My ear's to his chamber door, silently curling my lips around sounds:

Ando, Corma, Palma, Hweste, Yanta, Eru, Wilya.

I trace my moon circles in dust for lack of paper.

He lets me hold his carved stone disks, believing

I think they're trinkets for a child,

but by fire light, I memorize each symbol, good and bane.

At first, I made roses grow to cabbage size,
calmed a coiled serpent. Then a potion in his mead
to ensure he'd sleep through my first clumsy storms
coaxed from the sea, lightning drawn into my palm
on strings of words. I can bind him with silk spun
from moonbeams. At dawn, he always blames the spiders.

VI. *Merlin and Nimue*

—After Arthur Rackham, 1917

On the beach, at last, winter's dull ache

melting to starfish and glistening shells.

The kiss I've begged for pursues the throb

of my neck, my flesh molding to fit his gnarled grasp.

He trims and layers clumsy shapes I make

in damp sand, models for the castles he will build.

The mist cannot conceal distant spots of land

and what I begin to think are stories I've heard,

not a childhood remembered. I step farther away

with each wave, until his bellowing cry breaks

the tide's lure, and my garments tear on sharp rocks

as I'm dragged to a cave I know has been prepared for me.

VII. *Merlin's Cave, Tintagel*

—After a photo of modern-day Cornwall, England

I've never heard him say the name of God
but he knows the path to Golgotha, measurements
of a holy tomb: forty cubits of darkness, salt
stabbing my bleeding knees and swollen eyes.
If I will not live to love him, I must die to leave him,
or so he says with his last breath.

Some say his soul cries out from within, but I know
nothing of a soul, only a spell, a body frozen on its knees
but rising to enter the shadow on my command, cave
sealed by a stone bearing scars of a sword, a master plan.
Today, foamy cascades of the smallest streams pierce
immovable boulders, forsaking monuments for the open sea.

II

Sarah Brightman, PBS concert

The soprano shimmers in the spotlights, her breasts
creeping upward, rebelling against the designer
gown while bare arms stroke the air like paintbrushes.
Black curls shiver and burgundy lips kiss French
and Italian syllables as ivory skin
clings to sculpted cheekbones, smooth as latex.

“If I ever fell in love with a woman,” my mother
says, in a sharing mood as the screen splits
and PBS spokeswomen drown the final note
begging for donations, “it would be her.”
I don’t try to explain why I could never love
a pixel body, a voice on a spinning rainbow.

I want to hear her sing in the shower,
free her from every hook and button and throw
a baggy T-shirt over her head, fingers lost in her disheveled hair.
I would brush away mascara flakes, making room for tears,
remove every trace of makeup and flush her cheeks
with bad jokes, and clumsily coat her lips with mine.

Campus Carnival

Kids splatter paint on spinning
frisbees under G.L.O.B.A.L.'s tent.
One dad asks what the letters mean—
“Save the planet?”

I start with “Gays, Lesbians...”
but he cuts me off—*Oh*—
demanding his tickets back: he won't
support “that kind of thing.”

To his left, a gay alumni
mixes peach and silver;
to his right, a lesbian's rainbow
fingers turn knobs.

He glares at his son's carnation
spiraling across blue plastic.
His daughter's choice of basic black
spreads with every revolution.

“Don't touch them. They're not dry.”
His daughter pulls against his arm.
Each color reflected in his son's eyes
hardens and casts a metallic gleam.

Fit

Lightning killed my neighbor
 but shot up from the ground
 harmlessly between my cousin's legs:

"That close," he says, fingers an inch apart.
 Bolts can trim off a single branch or leaf
 and melt sand into vessels of fine crystal.

One turned an Oklahoma man's skin green
 and traveled down his son's umbrella
 to paint black lacquer on his nails.

Myths tell how lightning gave us sex:
 too proud as whole beings, four legs, two heads,
 Jove split us, leaving holes and jagged edges, puzzles

begging to be turned back into pictures.
 "It's nature," says the radio preacher,
 "Male and female are made for each other—

two men or women just don't fit."
 I wonder if he's ever seen lightning strike the same way
 twice, or completed a jigsaw without connecting

pieces of tree and sky.

Translations

In the Tsepesh family, every generation has an Arkady,
 a "Son of Heaven." The one sitting at the table is 33
 but hormone treatments and ten years of prison
 grayed his hair, made his hands so shaky
 his mother's *porumb cu vin* spills off his spoon.

When his wife came to the States, away when her father
 reported him, she never said why he'd been arrested.
 The shirtless boy he'd coached in gymnastics
 returned in handcuffs when he answered the door,
 but he alone faced the sodomy charges.

His sentence was meant to be brief, just long enough
 to anul the marriage, for his family to get out of touch,
 but every partner cost him another year, another drug,
 for consensual sex would not be overlooked.
 Just when he'd stopped counting, the law was reneged.

He speaks no English and his son, Arkady, speaks no
 Romanian. It's up to me. I tell his son he's sorry
 he wasn't there to see him grow, his real crime. He wants
 to know if what they say is true. I look in Webster's *New World*
 but can't bring myself to ask him if he is really *imoral*.

Hide

The rainbow flag over my closet can conceal
 illegal candles, hot plates, hamsters, but not
 my roommate's black eye the night I threw out

her girlfriend. *Never had anyone file
 assault charges against a girl*, the security officer
 mumbled. My friends didn't believe me:

Jean's so tiny—how could she hurt anyone?
 Two women small enough to share a dorm-sized
 bed, but enough scattered laundry to absorb

the water poured under our door, fraternity prank
 about dykes bursting. For once, Dawn wished the wrinkled
 t-shirts were a guy's, to be an average battered woman

in need of rescue, instead of a gay rights slogan. She invited
 everyone in to see "normal" lesbians, forgetting
 to hide a relationship no more loving than straight.

Fence

Bisexuals test the limits of gay and straight alike.
I introduce my man and people look for a corresponding woman,
asking if he minds that I could never be monogamous.

In the same breath: "Being gay or lesbian
isn't a choice, not just about the sex," and
"Get over yourself and pick a side of the fence."

For me, building and tearing down fences is familiar:
At the barn, I helped dig out rough wooden posts
to install white polymer, free of nails and splinters.

One horse discovered flexible rails could pop
if he threw his weight. Each day, I'd find
naked posts and scattered white stripes, drop

my hay bale to hurry after the loose gelding,
scan the property, the highway's stream of trucks,
only to find the horse still grazing within.

As I reassembled his building blocks,
he'd raise his head and prick his ears as if to say,
what is this fence of which you speak?

Clitoridectomy

Tasiah had the first procedure at age six, her mother holding her as the near-sighted woman scraped the hood of her clitoris with a flint knife, the villagers shaking sacks of nutshells to muffle her screams. Ten years later, her vagina narrowed with acacia thorns to produce a tightness

pleasing to a man, certifiable virginity to fetch her father a high bride price. She made love *to* her husband but not with him, her body a cold cave full of burning sand.... Five years later, at a market place in Johor: an uprising, a stray bullet. She became a pregnant widow.

She fled from one revolution to another, her sponsor meeting her at the airport, naked to her eyes in summer clothes. The other waitresses threw her a baby shower. Confused by disposable diapers, formula, antiseptic wipes, she remembered her older sisters, the smell of sweet herbs on glowing embers.

At the *melenggang perut*, the seventh-month ceremony, the women would've rocked her in a cloth hammock, rubbing her belly with hardboiled eggs and coconut oil so the baby would slip through her fatally inflexible anatomy. Instead, she had only a scratchy paper gown and the wand covered

in cold gel. She told the doctor it was time for her to be "opened," or the baby couldn't come. He ran a gloved hand over the maze of scars, muttering about the crazy things women do to themselves. Numb from the epidural, behind sterile barriers, she didn't feel or see the stainless steel that pried her screaming daughter from the wound.

Burqa

Rob hands me a Zip Loc bag full of what looks
like dirty lace. On my birthday months ago,
nowhere near a phone or mail box, he cut the rope
around a bundle of rifles. A woman approached,
recognizable not by flowing hair or curves but by her burqa,
cloth hiding head, hips, ankles: royal blue against sand
and khaki, embroidered netting concealing her face. He'd learned
to talk louder, drive around women who couldn't see trucks.
They had to be covered or they might lead men into sin,
temptation neutralized before it existed, like drenching
a building that might one day catch fire, once-solid floors
rotting away. A slender hand lifted a string and a phantom voice:

“Your blade, please?” The compass on the knife’s handle spun
and reoriented as she slashed string and then whole cloth,
cutting a window to her face. Her cheek bled where she nicked it,
a matching spot on the shredded mask. Her eyes: green like mine.
Returning the knife to Rob, she kissed him and walked away. Despite the distance,
that birthday was my best.

Power Outage

August 14th. The blackout rippled
 across state lines, shocking stars
 with the absence of competing city skylights.

No respect for air conditioners,
 subways, international borders, the darkness
 drained New York, Ohio, Michigan, Canada,

but in California under brilliant TV spots,
 Bush assured us that terrorists were not
 to blame, the faulty grid an all-American mistake.

It's not al Quaida I fear when I walk home
 after dark, but the plumber two houses down
 who glances in my direction a second too long

or the car full of teenagers, windows down,
 only the heat index and exhaust
 between my world and theirs. Leaving Newark,

my suitcase slipped through the shadow box
 without a sound, but coming back from overseas,
 security officers dumped my bag, a random search

revealing a battery dangling suspiciously
 from my alarm clock but stopping short of
 a necklace shaped like a Lilliputian's sword.

You are wrong, Mr. President. So far
 behind glowing glass, atop a darkened world—
 the face of terror is yours: you are a man.

A Prayer for My Daughter

No storm at Yeats's Thoor Ballylee:
 only the steadiness of Irish rain feeding the stream
 just grazing the tower's south wall, but the bite
 of mildew on the ground floor tells the tale of floods
 that trapped the poet's family in the upper rooms.

I crawl like a toddler up the winding stair
 that funnels to a passage narrower than my hips
 and break through to a roof with Norman battlements
 for a railing and acres of pasture, verdure paled
 by the white of hawthorn in hair-like tangles.

In this tiny space between falling and rising
 water, I pray for the child cradled in my mind:
 May she be granted beauty but trust her face
 without the assurance of man or mirror;
 let the stranger's eye be damned.

I'd have her never fear to raise her hand,
 hammer a nail or beat a boy at chess.
 May she be open as a tree to sunlight
 but freely choose the breadth and tint of shade,
 whether her fall leaves blend red or shock silver.

Let her think opinions are her riches
 no divorce will halve or bank repossess,
 and may her bridegroom (whether groom
 or bride) bring her to a home where custom
 and tradition are the clay and she, the sculptor.

III

My Father's Pornography

When my fairy doll fell
from a wrought iron branch
of the banister forest, my dad
smoothed her ebony hair (silk
next to my blond straw)
and snapped plastic and violet chiffon
back into place. The same skill
assembled a crystal castle
by Christmas tree light with only
Japanese instructions. I was 22 before
I remembered other times, when he
turned me into a toy. Now video titles
are a foreign blur through cataracts, and fingers
wrought with neuropathy can't push buttons
much less build worlds. I don't bother
to read the tape I put in for him,
until I see a four-year-old's wig
between a man's legs.

Which Innocent Child

I. Pro-life Week, Eighth Grade, Religion Class

The second-trimester infant, all head
and heart beating beneath translucent skin,
floats in peach-colored liquid unaware
of laparoscopic cameras and a woman's choice.

He (sex easily determined) jumps
at the touch of the double-edged knife, mouth open,
gasping for the air he will never have the chance
to breath. Cut to outside world: vagina blurred

like a criminal's face, contents of the womb
pouring down plastic. Dime-sized hands and feet
lined up with tweezers and the final shot:
sunken head with blood tears in empty eye sockets.

Half my class bolted from the room.
Some fainted. The rest of us filed out at the bell
as the teacher reminded us of homework, adding:
Imagine if your parents had done that to you.

II. Pro-life Week, Senior Year, Hillcrest Abortion Clinic

Dirty snow encrusts the pavement
(rocks removed after too many injuries)
and January wind bends our signs—
It's a Child, Not a Choice—

but can't drown out the drone of *Hail Mary*,
full of grace. My hands are numb around plastic beads,
a small sacrifice to protect the unborn.
A classmate's mother spots a woman and a girl.

Please don't lead your daughter into sin.
The wind catches the girl's hood, revealing
an oversized head, flat face with wide, unfocused
eyes, tongue twitching, unable to lick chapped lips.

"She's nine! It was her *uncle*."
God's ways are not our ways. The mother rubs
the child's stomach and pulls her toward the door.
We'll pray for you. "Don't bother."

Touch

Sexual Immorality, chapter seven of ten:

My religion teacher sighs and blushes when she can't avoid saying the words. *Masturbation*.

A sexual act with oneself, always a mortal sin.

"The body is not a plaything," I write in my notes,

"True sex is for couples (ONE MAN + ONE WOMAN)."

At home, my girlfriend up from New Orleans

rolls her obsidian Creole eyes at my lessons.

The day Merrique's grandmother caught her touching herself in the rusty bath tub of their one-room, tin-roofed shack, she smiled and moved the girl's finger up half an inch.

Learning to give our lovers bubbling warmth starts there.

Nudging my homework off the bed with a bare foot,

she lays me down: *Cher, what else they tell you not to do?*

Graffiti

Laura is a dike!

Fresh black sharpie manages to make the aged pink
of the bathroom wall look worse.
In this Catholic school—one hill, one building, one bathroom—
I am the only Laura.

Pulling out my favorite pen
wedged between a library card and lunch money, a purple
too bright to use on tests without losing points,
I cross out *i* and write *y*,
and print neatly underneath:

No, little Dutch boys don't stick their fingers in me.

Back in Sister Maryann's economics class
I realize the vice principal, who measures skirts with rulers
to slap any visible display of thigh, will know
who to punish—who else would defend me publicly?

Armed with the forces of Comet cleanser and steel wool,
I scrub off both black and purple and most of the pink.
By Monday, white, waxed tiles line the walls
so violating ink evaporates on contact.
Sometimes the smallest infraction brings redemption.

My Lady

Non-Catholics call it Mary-worship:
 gazing at icons of a woman draped in powder blue
 and chanting, *Hail Mary, Blessed Mother, Regina Coelli*.
 Spanish goldsmiths gave her a throne and tears of diamonds,
 but Scripture left her sitting on a donkey, kneeling

at the feet of an angel or the foot of the cross.
 From a young age, my role model was assigned to me:
 a teenager impregnated by prophecy, shielded from the mob
 by a man she could never make love to, ever-virgin.
 Our Lady: Their Lady.

On the altar in my bedroom, my Goddess isn't
 trapped in text or freeze frames, only embraced
 in visions: a huntress drawing a bow, star-glittered
 hounds running at her heels. A black-skinned
 rider herding the Nile into the harvest fields.

She is change, ever-nothing, seasons of Earth,
 cycles of Moon: maiden, mother, wise crone,
 born from darkness, dying to shine again.
 She is not the woman in danger of stoning.
 Eons in her womb give the stone its weight.

Brass Rubbing Workshop

Pulling black paper tight across brass,
 finger in a valley of metallic silver chalk, I rub
 furiously to force the unicorn to the surface
 per the instructions printed on the Medieval pamphlet.

Heat and friction capture every edge
 of the creature resting from a journey through death:
 the twists of the magical horn, curled legs,
 flowing mane I highlight with gold,

scattering dust into an aura fit for a resurrection.
 I roll gently over the shallow imprint
 of an eye, desperate for detail. My hands
 burn long after I peel the paper away

but the brass beneath is still cold, like the tomb
 it once adorned. Compared to the original,
 my child-like copy in its complimentary frame
 would be more at home between magnet and refrigerator.

Beside me, Rachael has pared a sliver
 of copper down to a pencil point and doesn't rub
 her lion but sketches him, thickening shoulders,
 thinning his mane, adding the tail the brass maker forgot.

Our tour guide frowns as Rachael signs the portrait
 with illuminated letters that rival Coptic scrolls
 she won't show us for two more floors. *You're here*
to rub brass, she says, but Rachael only laughs.

Three months later, the nurse reads the instructions
on the rape kit, holding sterile swabs for a procedure
she has never done in a small, silent town.

Rachael's reddish-gold hair sticks to her mouth

so long I finally push it back, wincing when I smear
blood on her neck. But not even cold metal and probing fingers
make her twitch, her eyes lacking the slightest gleam
of tears. One side of her brush-burned face

bears an imprint of the pavement outside Wal-Mart
where he was waiting, his every feature now etched
beneath her torn scalp, details she will never report.
I grip her hand, more for my own comfort.

Unstable

Chemistry class made me nervous, the ease
with which I could sketch and calculate death:
CO, a lopsided molecule, rings of electrons
that spiraled when they should've spun,
the natural reaction to restore equilibrium
by stripping oxygen from hemoglobin. Leaky coal
furnaces. Entire families didn't wake up.

Aaron failed chem (and algebra, history,
English), no time or space for homework
in foster homes he never talked about
but didn't have to. At Homecoming, Marie
begged me: "He's lonely, ask him to the dance.
It's just one night." One night too many.
High on meth, he half jumped, half collapsed

on top of me, forcing the air from my lungs
until I scratched with painted nails and crawled
out of the car. He cried when I crushed
his hand in the passenger door. I almost
opened it. Calls to my house, my father
telling me how stupid I was, Marie's cracked rib,
once-stable friends who took turns blaming themselves.

Connemara

I. Hometown

Leaving Saint Monica's after Midnight Mass,
 I tell myself the man stroked my finger
 in the bowl of holy water ringed with evergreens

“accidentally.” But blocks later, a shadow encroaching
 between streetlights, his boots crunch snow
 like bones. Caught at the intersection, incense tightening my throat, a chapped hand
 reaching for my hair, I bolt into traffic,
 leaving strands in his fist.

II. College Karate Club

My glare reshapes partner into man,
 blurring to graffiti—guns, knives. Tendons
 taut, I catapult, knuckles just short of

Kate's nose, finger hairs bending to her breath.
 She blocks. I counter, frayed white sleeve flapping
 liked a battered curtain. Hips thrust, fusing
 physics to art,

one, reverse
 punch, *two*, upper
 cut, *three*, knife
 block, *four*, back fist

strike. Kate pinches the circulation from my hand
 lingering too long in her reach. Swinging my leg
 like a pendulum, attempting to beat time,
 roundhouse kick, burn of a blistered sole, green belt lashing
 with the vocal burst from my sacral chakra—*kyaaah*—
 my partner flinches.

III. Merlin Park, Renmore, Ireland

Some distance from sidewalks packed with believers, my lens
 catches St. Nicholas's Cathedral and a slice of mossy beach and a white-robed
 couple, arms spread for their goddess, not tourists hunting leprechauns.

Soft voice behind me. I'm no longer alone. *Are you
 enjoying your stay?* the man asks, then his handshake
 tightens to a grip: I'm pinned to a car, keys in my pocket
 cracking the side mirror. Tongue stronger than whiskey.

Wrenching one hand away, my nails draw blood
 from his scalp, my elbow splintering his nose, and I'm free,
 running through a foreign neighborhood.

IV. Shop Street, Galway, Ireland

Two days before I go out again.
 This time, I search for rare gem dealers rumored to be druids.
 Down an alley—and there's his unwashed face:

yellow and plum bruises, rust-coated nostrils.
I hope I didn't upset you.
 I'm backed to a wall as he closes the gap.

A spell never used and only half remembered
enters my mouth, exiting like balloon static crackling

in hair, the air thickening to cloudy white,
my deep voice stretched to a shriek. He falls
before my fist connects, stumbling from the wall
of an unmarked shop. Inside,

bins of amethyst and topaz. But it's the unpolished
green Connemara marble that draws heat from my touch,
sea weed and spin drift riding a petrified wave.

The shopkeeper's wife curls my fingers
around stone, pushing away my Euros,
and I still cling to it as my plane

rises above Shannon Airport,
white smoke above a mass of green.

Paper Chains

I.

In Hubert A. Connor's 7th grade doctrine class
we took no exams, had no homework assigned.
Instead, we acted out the Stations of the Cross
on the baseball diamond, his blood mixing with mine
as we scavenged the school grounds for the sharpest thorns.
Tim, a.k.a. Christ, carried a branch to first base
and fell. I played the guard who cursed him in Latin
and lashed his back with Mr. C.'s leather shoe lace.
When we read about manna falling from the sky,
we made our own desert dessert, plaid uniforms
smeared with flour, powdered sugar and raw honey,
but potential Pope Nick promised dress code reforms
when we recreated the college of cardinals,
the future of the Church in the hands of us all.

II.

We wrote our favorite verses on slips of paper,
deep violet for Advent, pale yellow for Lent,
quotes from Therese de Lisieux and Albert Switzer
twisted into chains that spanned fifty feet and nine months,
lining every window, chalk ledge, fluorescent light:
we were brothers, sisters forever linked, he said.
We listed sins we'd like redeemed on strips of white,
nameless, for God alone, words facing the inside.
Another section held the meanings of our names,
my last name from Thomas the biblical doubter,
my first, a crown of victory in Roman times.
He told us his meant "shining mind" and "wolf-lover."
His middle name, Andrew, was Greek for "manly,"
said the deep voice behind a thick beard streaked with gray.

III.

In 8th grade, we returned to find an empty space:
circle of desks turned back into rows, a few links
of the Gospel of Matthew stuck in candle wax.
No teacher hired yet to fail to replace
the man who'd taught our other teachers, thirty years
of middle school, squirming kids fresh out of recess,
nursing the pains of late-April Senioritis,
classes no one wanted, hats nobody would wear.
"Mr. Connor's finally reached retirement age."
"We heard he's been ill. He spent all summer in bed."
"He hasn't been the same since he lost his, um, friend."
"I'm sorry, but I'm not at liberty to say."
It happened Halloween, my first year past the age
to trick-or-treat, the funeral held on All Soul's Day.

IV.

They say all Irish Catholics have the gift of gab;
I sat silently beside the Connors in the pews:
“What are we supposed to do? Pretend we don’t know?”
“At least don’t say anything in front of the kids.”
“Lots of old people die of pneumonia.” “Not this—
you can only get this from AIDS.” “He wasn’t...” “Yeah.”
“It was Peter’s fault, that bastard he was with.”
“It’s not our place to judge him. Who are we to say?”
“We weren’t brought up to be like that. It makes me sick.”
“I can’t believe they let him be anointed.” “He
shouldn’t be buried in St. Monica’s.” “You think
Father Pat knew?” “Of course, all the priests are that way.”
His nephew stops whispering and steps over me.
I ignore his speech. I’d just heard the eulogy.

V.

I thought back to the aquarium by the desk
where Mr. C.'s snake Samson allegedly lived.
Late March before we finally worked up the nerve
to tap on the glass and shuffle around the rocks.
We left him a rubber lizard, pink and squishy—
Delilah, of course—who must've chased poor Sammy out.
We found out fast he hated "pink, pretty, and cute."
I wondered if there had ever been a Sammy
whose story had outlived him. No one seemed to know;
few students had ever asked and fewer had dared
to disturb the home of one so well-regarded.
Easier to accept, pretend, keep up the show.
I wished I had kept digging in the gravelly floor
until something bit me, and then I'd know for sure.

VI.

Five years later, a college group with eight gay men:
In high school, I was alone, well, except for one.
He wasn't like them at all. "You really think so?"
A theater major wearing socks tie-dyed lime green
nods knowingly when I describe the skits and plays:
"Okay to be a drama queen on stage; no one
knows you're really playing yourself." But he wasn't.
He wore dark suits, short hair, his voice a booming bass.
"Like we used to be; we all overcompensate."
He liked sports, volunteered at fire halls. "Ditto,
where else do they have public showers, men in shorts?"
"You said he had a flair for crafts and liked to bake?"
By now, I'm shaking, crying, how did I not know?
It's not your fault, they say. He didn't want you to.

VII.

After three months volunteering at AIDS Resource,
I can spot the signs: pneumonia when the weather
changes, fall and spring, shingles on the face (carefully
hidden by a beard), dementia: they know me
one day and forget the next, would need their students
to bang on office doors, remind them of class.
Most people can't afford the new meds. Drugs cost more
than they can make, and they make more than my teachers,
but what everyone needs is a diagnosis.
My friends stand around when the rep comes to campus,
all of them needing a test, all scared to go first.
I start the line, answering quickly: No drugs.
No unprotected sex. No risk factors. I'm sure.
Then I remember cut hands and a crown of thorns.

VIII.

For two weeks, I prayed, though I wasn't sure to whom,
until everyone's results return negative.

But guilt honed from my eighteen Catholic years
still lingered: why was I—not he—spared early death,
a life of secrets, public fronts, and family shame?

“You kids are stronger than he was.” Bill, at 60,
grew up in Mr. C.'s time. “You chose not to be
ashamed. He couldn't handle being out. You can.”

On my link in that fragile white chain, I confessed
to saying one thing and believing something else.

Mr. C. never read it but now I realize
he would've understood, for he taught us a faith
that wanted him in Hell. Some part of him must live
in me. Teaching us well is a sin I can forgive.

IV

The Dance

My boyfriend risks his life overseas
for his country, but for me, he risks
dishonorable discharge: hanging with my friends,
conduct unbecoming of an officer.

Tonight, he sits on the designated wallflower couch,
bobbing his head lightly as couples of every gender
combination grind to techno. He releases my hand
so I can join two girls under the strobes.

My friend Paul approaches my helpless partner,
points to the dance floor as a DJ switches to Celine Dion.
I imagine their conversation, as Rob points
and Paul points to Jon at the punchbowl: "I'm with her."

"Yeah, well, I'm with him. It's just a dance."
Rob takes Paul's hand, looking down at the one
on his shoulder. His right arm dangles for lack of
comfort, as he shifts from one foot to the other.

But by the end of the song, he's reluctant to part,
swapping stories about rock climbing,
growing up in North Sunbury
where everyone has things to hide.

My Boyfriend's Miscarriage

On a Harley Davidson notepad, I draw a normal uterus:
pear-shaped, adorned on either side with ovaries,
and then mine, upside down, dragged by a mass of eggs
on the left, gnarled fallopian tubes with nowhere to go.

The perspective father of my children cocks
an eyebrow. *Is it still possible?*
Wouldn't a child of your own body
mean more? How would a man know?

I find him face down on our mattress
shaking with each sob, the phone beeping where he'd let it
fall beside a Christmas photo of his niece, bald head
covered by a Santa hat, smiling past cheeks swollen by chemo.

I wrap an arm around his waist, but he flinches
when I brush his hip, the scar that will never
fully heal. The surgical drill pierced his femur, drawing
the rich red marrow from the hollows of his pelvis

to patch holes in a child's blood. The only relative
whose genes matched hers....
Nine months later, the cells he donated
died inside of her. *We can adopt*, he says.

That's the last part of me I want to lose.

Rondeau for the Second Persian Gulf War

This war has made me a cliché:
a soldier's girl on the home front, waiting,
except that I rivet no sheet metal, plant
no victory garden, and my collapsed veins won't
allow me to bleed for my country.

The only rationing I do is stretching
brief visits to provide a year's worth of memories.
Trapped in opinion limbo, I can't cheer or spit when he departs.
This war has

turned his face into the news clip I least want to see.
I go through the motions of education and career,
a life paved by better women who filled men's gaps
and won battles I've never had to fight.
My greatest burden is guilt over a life going too well
like this war has.

Before

I'll remember not knowing who you were:
the one who stood at attention, even in jeans,
back when we knew we'd never have another war.

How could a poet relate to the Corps?
I saw only drills and bolts and khaki green.
I'll remember not knowing who you were:

the one who danced with the chin-up bar,
twenty in the time I struggled to do one,
when we knew it was exercise, not training for war.

I spent time with your words, never tore
through mail for the shaky letters you sent.
I'll remember not knowing who you were,

back when I thought my mailbox was secure,
when my eyes could sweep a map and miss Afghanistan,
when we knew we'd never have another war.

Now I don't know where the hell you are
or if you'll still be Rob after all you've done.
I'll remember not knowing who you were
back when we knew we'd never have this war.

Body Heat

He's only in love with your body heat.

Christy, the biology major, buries her nose in Darwin
as my baby dragon, Galahad, skitters over my cold band
of silver to perch on my ring finger, flushing to chartreuse.

To her, he is *anolis carolinensis*,
a heliothermic polychrotida who warms his blood
on an owner whose overgrown primate brain
imagines affection beyond food or mating cycles.

Christy doesn't buy reptiles at Renaissance Faires,
dub them Medieval names, spend hours trying to describe
their exact shade of green, or decorate their habitats
with gourds and holly to celebrate seasons spent alone.

When Rob returns from one war, waiting to be shipped
into another, he can't describe a cave full of Afghani
women who hit him with rocks, not knowing the camouflage
fatigues of one side from another. When he tries to find the words,

his eyes glaze, watching a scene too far away
to understand, too close to forget. My details
of the six months he's been gone fill the silence,
days where survival was always guaranteed.

Too tired to make love or even finish a meal,
but kept awake by window drafts—winter's
shock after half a year of deserts—he lays
his head in my lap to stop shivering.

Family Values

The lesser half of 2.3 kids, I leave blood relatives
 for a man who camps over Thanksgiving break:
 two-person tent, one sleeping bag, six dogs.
 I wake with an aging German shepherd's jutting hip
 against my leg, his snores drawing the tent flap

in and out. By my ear, the middle-aged lab
 with salmon tongue accustomed to bathing litters
 licks sap from dirty blond curls. Two young Rottweilers
 use Rob's back as a spring board and tackle
 me, tugging each other's ears and collars

before curling up like a cinnamon roll. Shortcake
 the Sheltie jingles in spaces where nothing else could fit,
 feathery tail sweeping dirt from nylon. The husky pup,
 mouth smudged with turkey gravy from poorly sealed
 Tupperware, stalks a sliver of rope, the tent's only

support, her owner flicking her tail just in time. Barks
 spanning half an octave rouse a herd of deer, fawns
 that will lose their spots with the season's first bullets.
 Rob's kiss tastes of pumpkin and cranberries, overnight whiskers
 scrubbing multicolored hairs from my drool-coated cheek.

Yellow Woman



Rob's aunt, shaman of the Laguna Pueblo,
not knowing what to do with me,
mixed rituals and shuffled nations.

He draped a turquoise and silver necklace
over my blond head, no kisses or vows necessary
for a marriage under Cherokee law.

Next, a Laguna bonding ceremony:
washing each other's hair and feet
with water warmed in adobe vessels.

Words no more than tonal grunts to my ears:
*May the wind be always in your hair,
may your feet be ever on the ground.*

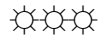
Final sprinkling of sweet corn and eagle feathers,
riding double on a borrowed pony
and sharing chicken fingers at Friday's.



I shouldn't have told my family.
My brother tried to rip off my talisman and "divorce" us.
My father asked what I'd been smoking in my peace pipe.

My mother called me a coward
for not inviting them, afraid Rob would leave me
at the altar if he saw who I came from.

My cousin said I didn't have to worry
about my poetry career; I could join a circus:
the first ever blond Injun.



When I return, Rob's aunt strokes my hair and tells me
the story of Kochininako—
Yellow Woman, daughter of the sun.

Born with blinding rays sprouting from her scalp,
she was abandoned in the hills above her frightened village,
fed by hummingbirds, cradled by the spider's web.

For years, sun scorched the grass, buffalo
fled and people starved. Then a woman arrived
who danced until corn fell like rain, each kernel

planted with a strand from her head. Summer
gave birth to mouthfuls of gold. The Laguna vowed
never again to cast out a girl with corn-silk hair.

