

Jesus, Psychics, and Women

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Self-Portrait

1. My Mother Confused Me With a Satanist

She'd thought I was into voodoo
ever since she caught me
spanking my dolls when I was seven.

When I was twenty, she broke
into my email: Pagan Tree Ritual.
She quoted a pamphlet on the dark side:

*T-r-e-e is Trading Righteousness, Entering Evil.
I've read up on your cult.
I know about the blood, the Satan-chants.*

I lit white candles for peace,
clutched rose quartz in each palm,
searching for a spell to draw love from the earth.

2. My Girlfriend Confused Me With Britney Spears

One more time, baby, one more time.
The next day, she'd had enough pop,
thought she could turn a dial,

stop my sounds. I sang the blues,
sang hard-rock fuck-you's,
packed my bags and sang myself to sleep.

3. My Dog Confused Me With a Fire Hydrant

4. My Country Confused Me With a Homewrecker

Protect marriage from the homosexuals! America cried.
She pointed her laws at me like accusing fingers.
She printed my picture on Wanted posters:

*Watch out for lesbians with sledgehammers,
for fags creeping in the corridors,
smashing marriage to an ideological rubble.*

I squeezed my wife's trembling hand.
To block America's loud protest,
we rolled that word—*wife*—into matching earplugs.

5. Mrs. Blancher Confused Me With Jesus Christ

*You're slouching, forever slouching.
Pretend your back is a board,
pretend there's always someone watching.*

*I need you to rid me of this backache,
I need groceries, need money,
need you to bring my plants back to life.*

*Chew with your mouth shut,
resist the urge to pass gas.
There's always someone watching.*

*Talk to my daughter, convince her
to stay home, convince my creditors
to stop calling me, convince me
to open my eyes each morning.*

She tried to feed off me,
a mouth consuming the host.
My flesh could never soften to bread.

6. A Tapeworm Confused Me With a Happy Host

7. My Roommate's Friends Confused Me With a Happy Host

Dirty underwear I don't recognize litters the floor.
They've consumed all the eggs, the refrigerator
meets my desire with an empty stare.

I want their rap music outlawed, want sleep.
I want to give myself over to the god of rest,
want to dream myself into a new body:
perfect, alone.

I.



The Jesus Mirror

My seventh birthday—
I opened the biggest box
first. A giant fish mirror.
To symbolize Jesus' love,
my mother beamed.
I asked what *symbolize* meant.

By eleven I realized
I always looked fat
in the Jesus mirror.
I started throwing up
in secret. It was the only view
I trusted.

That's not entirely true.
I never trusted, really,
and I never thought I was fat.
But when prayers couldn't stop
slaps, belts, screaming,
when prayers couldn't
keep my sister home
or stop my father at night,
I pushed fingers down
my throat, searching for peace.

By fifteen my face
was an old, deflating balloon.
I buried buckets of vomit
in the backyard
while my mother pretended
I was in my room doing homework.
I muttered *Jesus Dear Jesus*
when she found the diet pills.

The night my sister said *I'm pregnant*
my mother shoved her across the room,
shattered the Jesus mirror.
I saw three broken women
and I understood *symbolize*.
I understood *Jesus*.

Photographs of My Mother

She's the spiked red heel
stomping through a marshy field

and the carnivorous plant by the marsh,
extending fragile leaves, sucking fly-blood.

She's the crow that flies into a hailstorm,
drops dead without a caw

and the dead Junebug, shiny as newborn pennies,
riding an ant piggyback to the grave

and the strong back flexing beneath the sun
shoveling dusty earth into springtime.

She's God's dusty lost-and-found box,
boasting one blue mitten, one unraveled scarf

and the blue blending my father's red words to purple,
the flowers bleeding colors to brown.

She flowers once a year, at midnight,
shy white petals wishing on the moon.

She's the white background photographers seek,
the blank wall behind my father's profile.

Therapy Exercise

“Enroll objects as your parents”
so I turned myself God, breathed life into rose quartz,
called it Mother. And the little blue hanging man,
an effigy of my father. I made him real,
drew veins along his neck, placed each eyelash.
I criticized my mother: *You are just a stone*
and my dangling father: *You, an abused doll.*
For fifty dollars an hour I could beat my father,
the red bat enrolled as my inner child hitting back.
My mother hid in my pocket, refused to comment.

“De-enroll your objects”
and I called their lives back to me
as God animates dust
then sucks it back to nothing.
I de-enrolled but still felt Mother
warm in my palm, shook Father
one last time just in case I’d left any trace
of myself inside him
like his pubic hair the police plucked
out of my little-girl-vagina.

On the drive home, I took deep power breaths,
visualized the sky as a smiling Father,
each cloud a proud dimple,
or an eyebrow, a gentle tongue.
The trees became my mother,
solid against the sky.

Home again, I cradled pink stones
under my pillow, cringed at the blue curtains.

Water Reed

I never went to your grave, Granddaddy.
And Mom—always forcing me to do things
and never understanding
when I couldn't—understood.

I waited in the car,
my skin sticking to the red leather interior.
You waited in the other side
of the hill, your gravestone hidden
by earth, your daughter still scurrying
to your call, still living in the same town
you raised her not to leave.

I looked at the rows of fake or dying flowers
as she disappeared over the hill,
seemed to sink below ground
to join you. I imagined her bending
to kiss your cold stone
like I imagine her as a child
forever bending
under drunken blows and cold stares.

You always called her
your Little Water Reed
because she was conceived by a pond.

Water reeds are known for bending,
for holding fast
wherever their roots may be.

Brother Wind
(Knight of Swords)

You blur past breakfast—
dishes rattle from your cool passing.

The empty spaces you leave are yellow:
sunlight on a chair, bits of egg on the stove.

You almost know magic:
transform hours hunched at your computer

into teachers' smiles, weekends at SwiftyServe
into a yellow Corvette with wings.

You fly to school two hours early:
your mind a sword others wield.

You spear your own head—your blood
split evenly between Debate Club, Beta, National Honor.

You call wind from your sword
blow your days into two piles:

bones arranged by size, organs according to function,
but you're unsure what to do with the heart.

You split your mind into a scale,
weigh colleges like fruit.

You gather all the grass in the world,
separate each blade back to blue and yellow:

This is me. This is not me.

This is not me. This is me.

I fumble to embrace you,
but your hands are two perfect swords.

Forgetting the Storm

1.

You were afraid of lightning—
not thunder, lightning.
I'd crawl up to your bunk
and make caves from your quilt.
In the darkness of this checkered space,
you could finally close your eyes.

Even so, you clutched yourself small,
whimpered at the thunder
because it wouldn't let you forget
the lightning you closed your eyes against.

2.

As soon as you heard the creak
of Dad's weight straining my little bed,
you built your own cave.
I imagined your eyes scrunched
against the flash of his fingers
between my legs.

I made no sound at all
as you counted backwards from 100,
wishing him away.
When he left, his footsteps were thunder.

3.

At eleven, I'd just learned
to shove my finger down my throat,
bring secrets to the surface.
They thundered out of my body.
You heard, promised not to tell.

At sixteen, you learned
to spread your legs for money,
told me your secret
plans to run away.

4.

The day you left, we blasted
hard rock and Disney songs
until the walls shook.
You liked the odd combination,
said it was like us.

When the nightmares started,
I no longer knew
which memories were real.
I snuck a call to you,
asked you what you'd seen.
You said you didn't remember.

5.

The nightmares don't come
as often now. Now that we're adults,
we rarely speak. When we do,
you tell me of the God you found,
tell me you don't mind
being a single mother.

I tell you about classes,
about the snow in Pittsburgh.
We never mention our father,
but our scars remember him.
We are the earth, ripped
of trees, ripped of roots.
We try to forget the storm.

Speaking to the Pentecostal God

- I. (Five years).
Now I lay me down to sleep.
Please don't make my mommy weep
as Daddy beats us, says we're wild.
Spare the rod and spoil the child.
- A waxy happiness.
A smiling, crayoned sun.
- II. (Ten years).
Dear God,
Today my big sister ran away
because she kissed another girl.
Mom and Dad say she may as well
be dead, say she's going to hell.
Say *You* don't love her anymore.
Say she's got Satan in her.
Please, God, let my sister live.
Please don't send her to hell.
But maybe *You* shouldn't
send her back home either.
- The soft rain pleads
for green life's return.
- III. (Fifteen years).
- The silence between thunder
reveals the distance of the storm.
- IV. (Twenty years).
Hey God! Your flickering signs claim
You love all. You boast Your righteousness
from the sweaty mouths of preachers,
in faded letters on chipped offering plates.
- The cold rage of hail
beats down on a tin-roofed church.

Scenes of a Carpenter's Daughter

She carves *Father* in her forearm
calls it stigmata, miracle of pain.

He turns his body to bread;
bitter crumbs grace her tongue.

She disobeys command when she speaks;
when she weeps, she sins.

He forgives her from the inside out;
she bathes his feet in vomit.

He drags her uphill—
her brittle frame his cross.

A neighbor notices but will not judge,
snaps blinds shut.

He wears a crown of thorns between his legs.
Every time he visits, he draws blood.

**A First-Grader Tries to Speak in Tongues
at McDonough First Assembly of God**

She figures God's lips must be heavy,
pressed against so many bodies
until they tremble and fall.

The congregation looks
like it got its weekly spanking,
and she understands God the Father.

God's words must be holy,
his giant tongue pushing them
from behind teeth as big as mountains,
and not a single cavity.

The ushers—Mr. John from Zach's supermarket,
and Neighbor Tim—place blankets over those who fall
unconscious under the weight of God's secret code.
They flourish squares of paisley printed cloth
over each body until the church is a garden
waiting for God's green thumb.

She thinks, if God were a woman,
if she were God, she'd stitch
all those paisley people into a skirt.
She'd dance—her feet taking up
the whole stage of the earth.

But God does not dance.
She'd startled Sunday School
with that question, learned no,
God does not dance.
God sends people to Hell.

Hell is where they pour boiling water
on all the body's secrets.
There are no cartoons in Hell—
she'd asked that, too.

She does not want to go
to a place without cartoons.
If she were the voice of God—
like Mrs. Jacobs, whose jaw fluttered
before she passed out—if she were pure
enough to bring God inside
and let him back out, syllable by syllable,
then she'd never go to Hell.

She thinks she feels the Spirit
move over her, can almost see
those transparent fingers beckon.

She moves to the aisle, waits
for the heaviness of language
so large it fills heaven,
waits for God's moist breath.

Preacher Max silences his sermon,
a congregation of eyes waits
for God to squeeze himself
inside the skin of a little girl,
waits for Truth to pour forth
from the mouths of babes.

She can hear the air-conditioning roar,
wonders if that's God
trying to slip through the vents,
thinks maybe he got stuck.

The congregation whispers.
Her mother's face grows red as hell,
her father hisses like a snake.

She prays for God to drop his weight
like an anvil, to flatten her
into a pancake.

But the only heaviness is her mother
pulling her back into the pew.
Her father, holding her there.

Nine of Wind, The Screen
(Nine of Swords, The Nightmare)

Lily pads rest in the sky
and she's on the hilltop, staring
as eyes form in their center
and her mother rises up:
hair of fog, groin of weeds.
Before she can say *I'm sorry*
clouds funnel themselves,
drag her by her hair into the sky.
Her mother swirls to mist,
flings lily pads over her eyes.
The weeds wriggle into salamanders,
drop from the sky like a plague.

She opens her eyes to the moon's cold touch.
*I was conceived during the plague
of my cloud-mother's reign
and pushed through weeds to earth,*
she writes, clutching the pen
she keeps beside her bed like a sacred key.

A dry sound scratches the night,
and she knows it's a scorpion
with an elephant head.
Its ears are lily pads.

Dark spirit of life she begins
but stops. She was breathing her mother's name
with her father's voice.

Her father is a dragon,
but she steals his fire.
There is a price: her flesh
burns, and as she reaches
to embrace her mother,
her arms dissolve to smoke.
Her mother, the one who
never cries, who stands strong
as a forest, sheds her leaves like tears.

The sun's harsh rays remind her
she hasn't called her mother in a month
so she punches the numbers,
hears her mother's tight *hello*,
her father yelling in the background.
She wants to say *I miss you*,
wants to yell back at her father.
But she feels her voice dissolve
as her mother listens to air
and hangs up.

Dreamscape: My Mother Teaches Me to Do Laundry

My father's voice fills our days
with lightning's promise of thunder.

At night, our dreams are silent.
My mother and I share blood-
stained skirts, balance baskets
on our heads, cross hot sand.

Not sand—his fingers. Fingers pulling
our toes, stretching up to trip,
shoving into our noses and mouths
when we fall: grabbing the air, pushing it away.

No my mother says, and fingers shrivel
back to earth. A gentle river rises.

This water is good, my mother says,
sets her basket to rest.
Like this, and she passes stains
over stones.

The river claims our blood,
allows our dreamselfs to forget
we were ever wounded. Fingers prick
upward like cacti. *No* I say
as we coax blood from cloth,
hang our dreams to dry.

II.



I Want to Be an Apartment on Park Avenue

When I watch her sleep, I want
to be an apartment on Park Avenue,
its blessed walls sharing her every dream.

I want to be the kitchen chair
she calls her favorite,
the doll she couldn't sleep without.

I'd like to be the light blue curtains
protecting her eyes from sun,
the TV keeping her company
on lonely days.

I want to turn myself into Monet's *Sunflowers*
hanging on her wall, the colors
she marveled at
long before she whispered to me
Your eyes grow greener when we kiss.

I wish I were every doorknob
feeling her hands' desire,
the entire door
opening itself to her.

**I No Longer Want to Be an Apartment on Park Avenue
(When Meagan Refuses to Return My Phone Calls)**

The floor suffers her feet's daily tread.
She uses the kitchen chair
until it sags.

She used to call me Babydoll,
but she has pulled the head off
every doll she's ever owned.

If I were light blue curtains
protecting her eyes from sun,
I'd only fade until she threw me away.
As her TV, I'd exist on "mute."

I can't believe I ever wanted
to turn myself into a painting,
its colors hoping for her attention.
She'd just shrug, let her eyes wander.

I do not want to be a doorknob
waiting for her touch, some creaky door
following her every command.

.
From now on, I'm happy
being fingernails and laughter,
sobbing and skin.

I Want to Be a Forest Instead

Natalie stretches me into skin
larger than simply human.
Meagan had transformed me
into inanimate objects,
an apartment for her convenience,
but Natalie leaves me living.
Natalie adds leaves to my flesh,
expands my mind to sky.

When I see her running naked
through the woods, I want to grow
strong and solid as the oaks,
want to unfurl myself in every leaf.

I'd love to be the clouds
that capture her gaze
and the sun with its warm kisses
on each perfect nipple.

I want to be a forest
with Natalie inside me.
We'd synchronize our breathing,
exchange carbon dioxide
and oxygen—each exhale a gift,
each inhale a thank you.

River Woman

Your knowledge: a waterfall.
I wet my hair in the rush
of your thoughts.

I knelt on your banks
and drank, felt you
spread through my body.

I thought I knew
the ways of the earth,
thought rivers flowed forever.

But the night I stumbled,
tequila pulling my legs
from under me, my mouth
the mouth of a fool,
that night you dried to me.

I knelt in the scar
you left in the earth,
cupped dust to my lips.

I left offerings on your front porch
in the space near the door,
where we first kissed:

Incense with its cloudy fingers
stretching up to beg water
from the gods, a geode
to remind you of the shine
I keep tucked inside a dull shell.

I waited for days
as my thirst for you grew.
Everyday I ran my fingers
through the earth's dusty scar,
searching for any sign of moisture.

I do not know if there was magic
involved—a spell floating
through the incense—
but the earth cracked open.

You trickled back to me.
When we kissed, you flowed.

I rode the rapids,
rejoiced in the ensuing eddy,
in the space created
to lie still with you.

Conversation With the Woman Who Didn't Love Me Back

She tossed words like bones
to a neighbor's dog.

I gnawed.
There was no meat.

If I Were A Stalker

I'd send you cut-and-paste notes:

I want to taste your armpit

my love smells like Your earwax

Let me lick the lint your belly saves

I'd call you at four in the morning and whisper
*Name your intestines Betty
because it sounds like Beauty
and anything lucky enough
to stretch along inside you
must be beautiful.*

I'd write our names on brick walls with the Q-tips you throw out,
two each morning.

I want to press your cold toes
to my chin, want to paint my eyelids
with your foot fungus.

Feed Me beautiful boogers from your soul's nostrils.

I'd stand outside your window and dance
to the clatter of clutter collecting in your house.
I'd cartwheel through the cat-piss on the floor.
I'd breathe your bounced-checks,
lick your tears into cotton candy.

I know you hate your father.

I know why.

I can *hear* **the** hOn-blast broken-glaSs pop-pop-**POP**ping balloon
your *father* trapped in the mirrOr for You.

I'd like to *stop* those sOunds.

I'd like to taste the spice when you yell,
feel the soft curves of your whisper.
I imagine your smell moistening me to morning,
your tongue cleaning my cavities.

We'd squeeze our nightmares to milk,
one mug, two straws.

Wax Girlfriend

Cafeteria tables pressed against walls
made room for music. Mrs. Flannigan,
who usually served the potatoes, boogied
to the beat, did the slide, did the swim.
Students jammed their calculators
into corners, abandoned book bags,
became water dancers. They flowed
around your stiff bobbing.

In a room of liquid and lights,
you had substance I could touch,
your warm lips molded to mine.

I placed you by my bedside,
let you light up my nights.
I became greedy as fire.
The more I wanted you,
the more you melted.

I should have given you time
to cool, but I wanted
to touch your liquid self.
We should have realized
wax and fire can only be brief partners.

When my constant need to be near
left you puddled, I dipped my fingers
into this new form of you.

You burned onto my skin.
We could not say goodbye quickly.
I had to pick you off
bit by breaking bit.

8 Ways to Say Ex

1.

I was a popcorn kernel,
curved in my smooth shell,
happy to be a tough piece of the universe.

Your flame burst me open,
my soft entrails offered to you.
To you, I was simply a snack,
one among many. But you consumed
my entire being. I lost myself in you.

2.

I woke up this morning, brushed my teeth.
You kissed me. I kissed you back.
The day passed. You said *goodbye, forever*.
I brushed my teeth and went to bed.

3.

I hope your pale skin burns, even in winter.
I hope your teeth rot and fall out.
I hope you pronounce your r's like w's and everyone laughs.
I do not hope you drive off the bridge, but I do hope
your tire flattens, and no one stops to help,
and you're wearing tight heels, and there's a huge mud puddle,
and other cars splash your suit. I want you
to be muddy and pathetic, crying
about bunions. Stranded. Unable to change
your tire. With a sunburn. And a lisp.

4.

I am cereal, multi-grain O's.
You are milk, stored in a yellow jug,
promising longer freshness.

Your god is a four-year-old,
spilling you over the table,
letting you puddle to the floor.

Part of you splashes
into the bowl, surrounds me.
We call this a relationship.

We should realize
we're only good together
for a short while.

But I am cereal, you are milk—
neither of us has the power
to move.

I grow soggy,
immersed in what's left of you.

5.
You cannot leave me alone
in this ocean of myself.
You are my scuba gear,
you are Jesus helping me
find footing among the waves.
I cannot breathe underwater.
Please do not leave me alone.

6.
I am not your oxygen,
your water, your bread,
your life. You try
to breathe me, drink me,
your constant needs devour
my flesh, darken my life.

We live better apart.
You are no longer my wife.

7.
I am the lawn,
and you want to mow.
You want to go,
but I'm a red light.
Night gives way to day:
I'm that space in between,
that line that holds the sun
from the moon. Soon,
you'll be a car, driving
over the hill to disappear.
I'll try to be a stop sign,
but you won't even yield.
I'll be an empty cage.
You, the canary that flew away.

8.

We got mixed up together.

I put on your feet,
followed you around.

You wore my ears,
saw the world through my eyes.

You left us no time
to sort our pieces.

You walked away, your tongue
still thick in my mouth,
my legs carrying you out of my life.

I thought we knew each other,
thought we knew love.

But I looked down at my hands,
which were your hands,
and I had no idea
where those hands had been.

Luna Blackbird

Luna Blackbird knows how to pull stars
from the sky, leaves the sky dark
so she can twinkle, so she can move
like white fire against my flesh.

And she knows how to pull stars
from the stage, leaves silence
as she pulls their songs inside her,
grins to catch me watching.

Luna Blackbird sings in the shower,
clogs drains with her feathers
thinks it's hilarious
to see me cleaning.

Luna Blackbird sings showers
from the sky: weather-gods give rain,
thinks it's hilarious
when I scramble to save the crop.

Friends know my heart is aluminum,
tell me steer clear of that Luna Blackbird
because that bird flies in and out of my life,
takes anything that's shiny.

The Thursday Laura Left for Hawaii

Dragonflies arrived, bit one another's tails
and held on until they formed a ball of holes.
Not holes, space, Red Owl Woman said
as I sprinkled tears over this jumbled game
of wings, this tumbleweed of insects
that spun the wind for themselves, rolled against it.

I hoped the wet magic of my eyes
would weave those wings to blonde curls,
roll all that flight back to hips,
to lips pressed against mine.

Dragonflies followed the sun across the Pacific,
their feet tapping *goodbye* among the waves.
I lay in the darkness cast by the oak tree
where we first kissed, tried to sink into this shadow.

Red Owl Woman left only her blind eye open,
clapped her hands three times: *Trans-i-tion*.
The word rolled from her tongue like waves
breaking against a rocky shore.

Pull strength from the earth
as she pressed rose quartz into my palm,
pulled a potato from the ground
and handed it to me, steaming.

I found a seashell in my potato—
Red Owl Woman said that meant she was safe,
meant I'd see her again.

Every Thursday I find another seashell.
I string them into a necklace,
feel their weight pull me closer to earth
as I sit by the pond, trying to ripple it into an ocean.
I chant twilight from the trees,
wait for wings.

Girlfriend for a Day

Your eyes are wheat fields.
I don't want the harvest,
don't want to own the bread.
I sit quietly and watch
that ripple of gold
under all that sun.

Your scent is soft hunger,
is unbaked cinnamon bread.
I knead my fingers over your body,
watch you rise into my warmth.

Tomorrow, we will remember
all the reasons we cannot
walk together, two humans
carving the same path.

But today, you are a wheat field,
and I am the sun.
You wait, expectant as bread.
I am the oven, preparing myself
to hold you inside.

April

I love the feel of my nipple
between her teeth, a tight seed
that bursts into a sunflower,
thick-stalked, its petals full
and yellow as her laughter,
that laughter she sends soaring
about the room, twittering the sun
into the sky. I love the feel
of her tongue on my shoulder,
that wet serpent slipping
over rocks, capable of poison
but content for now, content
as the moans she sends crawling
to soak the sun's warmth. I love
the feel of her fingers yearning
inside me, salmon shimmering
upstream, glittering sun
through the darkness.

Love at First Sight in a New Orleans Bar

Her eyes click against mine,
random pool balls
cutting through smoke.

I'm her pocketed 8-ball,
game over.

III.



Camping in America

The tent smelled of mildew,
but we packed it anyway.

The radio was stuck in that staticky transition
between one big city and another.

Bush crackled out something
about the axis of evil and American interests.

I studied the coffee-stained map,
trying to find our position in the world.

The highway rushed us along,
pushed the cars into neat rows.

The station shifted. I thought it said
something about innocent love.

*No, Freddy said, Innocent blood.
It's on the news. It has to be blood.*

Freddy was growing his hair long again,
Sage had dyed hers purple.

We escaped the smooth highway,
bumped down the empty gravel road.

At a roadside stand, we stopped to buy cantaloupe,
the dirt under the man's fingernails full of knowledge.

We left our Nike's in the tent,
our Gap and Guess on tree branches.

We pretended we weren't American.
We weren't any country at all.

Our language was soft and had 49 words
for love, 13 for the taste of cantaloupe.

We ate with our fingers in a circle of sun,
juice dripping off our elbows.

Jackson Square Psychics

Honey, I'm telling you
it's the National Inquirer in 3-D!
We all know who Butterfly's baby-daddy-be,
and readings by Rose leave you marked
for alien abduction—I ain't kidding, child!

Now, let's see 'bout these cards.
You got blood dripping from your moon
'cause you keep sacrificing your intuition
and listening to your mother.
That's the Empress, right here, crossing you.

You best be watching out for these witnesses,
they be crossing you too.
All their talk about Truth
but they keep trying to stop me
from telling it to you.

What you really need to listen to
is your message from your higher power.
That's 10 of Cups, floating above everything.
Cups is water, Honey, and water is emotion,
and 10 of Cups is them little dreams of yours
all coming true.

Why you look so scared?
I done told you stop listening
to your mother. She's holding back the Ace
of Wands—that's you.
Wands is fire and fire is passion—
your signifying card is one big penis of passion.
Yeah, I said you're a penis,
being a penis is *good*
'cept your mother keeps stifling
all that creative energy you got.

Your recent past is Defeat
'cause you tried to carry it all on your own
and it done got too heavy.
Look at those mountains of light
way in the distance. Your 10 of Cups
is over there, but you're not looking.
See where you're looking?
Yeah, at the Empress, and she's always angry.

Now, your undercurrent situation is 2 of Cups,
which usually means a marriage but for you
it's your two kids. Don't look all heebie-jeebied—
I'm a psychic. I know you got two kids,
and I tell you what, you think you doing them good,
but you ain't, not when you letting your mother
knock them around. These things go in cycles,
don't need no psychologist to tell you that.
See, there's your Karma card. Cycle, like I said.

Now, your near future is Struggle
'cause you gonna start trying to change things,
and you got the Strength card right there
helping you out. Did you know
you could be a lion?
So this struggle is good, look where it's leading
right to your hopes and fears.
Your environment's 9 of Swords, The Nightmare,
but you ain't got time for that. You got 9
of Wands in your hopes and fears,
and you gotta let all that creativity blind out
them 9 swords.

You gonna end up with the earth beneath your feet,
look at your final outcome. You got 5 of Pentacles,
that's earth, that's money, Honey, that's life.
You think you need you momma,
but she just shakes you up inside. You start walking
alone, you gonna find you 5 of Pentacles.

That's all I got to say, less you got questions.
You hungry, them witnesses got sandwiches,
trying to feed us away from our evil lifestyles.
Sandwiches for Satan, I say. Maybe from Satan.
The Truth they got's for sheep—they say it themselves.
Anytime you ready I got more truth.
I work on a donation basis—
most people pop a twenty.

Born on Bourbon Street

She came out screaming,
put New Orleans to her mouth,
a breast full of heat,
a nipple of spice.

Her father was the steady beat
of late night bars,
her mother the brief "O"
of smoke-rings and fists.

She grew up bruised,
blood pooled under her skin
dark as gutter sludge.

The city thought *that chile's
gonna spread her legs before she fifteen
or, that chile's goin' home late one night
to shoot herself, just like her mama.*

But she thought *the cobblestone will last
forever, she thought, the river will always flow,
she thought, anyone can come here,
call this home.*

She didn't spread her legs
until she was seventeen,
her baby's eyes muddy
as the Mississippi.

*Another teenage mom. another tragedy
they said, but she hummed rock-a-bye, rock-
a-bye. Her man done run away, they said,
but she sang go to sleep, little one,
go to sleep.*

New York Subway

Secrets stand with hands stuffed
into pockets, eyelids flicker,
a lady in a black hat
stares at the Dunkin' Donuts ad
the entire ride.

Secrets can be the corpse of a child
rotting in the basement
or simply eyes darting
toward a stranger's cleavage.

A man with electric hair
and a twitch shoves a McDonald's cup
into the empty space around him.
God bless for a quarter. A nickel? God bless.

A man in Armani mutters *con artist*,
most remain trapped in their own spaces,
their faces the indifferent subway doors,
opening and closing as required.

At 96th and Park, a teenager bebops
away, a man with a cane struggles to his feet.
Their empty seats attract every covetous eye.

The man holds the empty McDonald's cup
between his teeth, covers his feet
with plastic bags. The subway opens
to the cold air. The man rattles away.

A Missed Opportunity To Volunteer at the Pittsburgh Food Bank

Nothing to eat, so I settled
for oatmeal and carrots—
not exactly cuisine, but people will eat anything
when they're hungry, I thought,
imagining the goo I'd serve like a god
to hungry congregations the next day.

I left the dirty dishes like shells
cluttering the shoreline where my mattress
pressed against the floor. I pushed in earplugs,
shut out sounds of the homeless
rustling through the night like leaves.

The moon followed their footsteps,
faded as day tipped over the horizon.
The alarm jerked my eyes open—
I silenced it with a slap,
fell back to darkness.

I dreamed I was a queen
with shriveled feet crammed
into golden shoes. I tap-tap-tapped
them against my hard throne.

The floor gathered itself into a mouth.
I threw in some lesser coins,
hoping it would close
before it sucked me in.

The red curtains chewed
on air, moved without words.
I have nothing for you—
they wrapped a kiss around my neck.

My crown loosened its rigid hold,
drooped into a frown.
I opened the window,
mouths poured in like snow.

Mouths worried my sleep,
large mouths pulling flesh from my knee,
smaller mouths forcing food
from my dry breasts.

When the alarm screamed again
I didn't bother waking.
Silence filled the room
like a bruised mouth,
like the tight space
inside a hungry body.

Lesbians of the Deep South

We are trees. We hide behind our leaves
when summer's heat seeks to kill.

Beneath the soil, we thread our roots,
braid our love, grasp the ground.

Our branches touch and tease
when wind is strong as lust.

Sky wedges between. His burning
eye searches to destroy.

We steal His sunlight, breathe
it green. Static summer leans

to Autumn. We flirt
in every shade of red.

Our flirting falls away, leaf by leaf
we strip to winter. We glitter

with shy snowflakes until a sudden burst
to spring and all her blushing blossoms.

We bow with fruit, and dream our daughters.

Skull Religion

Tiny skulls flower around her wrist,
their many eyes a collection of black holes
replacing her skin. *To remind me I'll die*
hitting the gas hard, slipping her pick-up
through rush-hour like a trout among stones.

She says it's a borrowed trick
from a religion whose name sounds like a cough,
a clearing away.

She scatters skulls throughout her life:
white protection overseeing her desk,
a hollow smile on the nightstand.
Her skulls in boxes now,
following her from Georgia to Massachusetts.

Because she'll die, she's got to move,
because she dreamed she was a skeleton
with clay-red bones, she needs a new job,
saves for a sailboat, learns sculpting
as kind of intercourse.

Because she'll die, eight tequila shots and a hit of acid
at her going away party *Hell fucking yeah!*

But her sheets soak her tears—
she ties fear down with a smile.

She says she needs skulls to remind her she'll die,
but everyday the skulls pull her
into their hard wombs
and shove her back out, shivering
but new.

A Family Formed on Jackson Square

The psychics' thick scarves mute
the constant cockroach shuffle.
Tourists toss change into a faded hat
because the juggler sent five knives slicing
through an air-borne orange,
that citrus sun falling in pieces.

On a milk crate covered with a scarf,
blessed by the palm reader—
the only man he's ever kissed—
stands the silver cowboy.
The idea's to hang
against a background of buildings
like a statue, like a great magnet
pulling coins from pockets
until they're stacked high enough
to pay the rent, and if he's lucky
a bourbon and some dancing at O'Flaugherty's,
those silver arms flowing liquid with the music.

The paint edges metallic to his lips.
His body's a statue, but his mind jumps
to his ex-fiancé. He had imagined their children
with sticky fingers calling him Daddy.
He still wears the ring she pressed into his palm
on a silver chain around his neck.

The juggler wipes the blades free
so they don't stick
at the next performance—
what looks sharp is real.
One sticky second could pull blood.
The orange, a gift from the fire-eater,
was going to be his breakfast,
but here's that girl with her ribs rippling
up her torso like piano keys,
like a ladder trying to break
through the sky and find heaven.

The silver cowboy wishes
he had a thousand oranges
to scatter about her like a father's kisses.
The tourists are laughing
because a fat man in a suit poked his silver belly
and, like a statue, he didn't react. Another poke
and maybe bills will come laughing
out of wallets with matching purses.

The tourists shuffle to the next human attraction.
The fat man in the suit bumps the girl
into a psychic's stand, cards fall like suicides.
Watch it, street trash. She lowers her head.
The silver cowboy wants to tackle the man
back to the earth he came from,
wants to carry her off on his shoulders,
show her the Live Oaks in Audubon Park,
read Goodnight Moon until she falls asleep
under crisp white sheets, and her sleep
is a form of thank-you. But tourists are paying
him for his stillness. Their pennies and nickels
clink like metal heartbeats.
He wants to pull her into his arms,
but he's a statue.
His only movement is breath.

IV.



The Silenced Princess

1. The Silenced Princess Weds

You were a tricky princess.
You spoke often so no one would notice
the silences between
so much sound.

You spun a magic web
of silver thread,
wrapped it around the memory
of his hands forcing your wrists
into the ground until the carpet burned,
your legs pried apart.

You became a princess.
All your memories were silver.
Each new day was gold.

You conjured up a Prince Charming.
He was a gentle creature—
this pleased you.

Love, for you, was his castle,
stone walls and a moat
holding the fairy-tale in place.
Love was the silver hiding your fear,
the weight of his jewels.

2. *Magic Marriage*

There is no room for rape
in a fairy-tale. You weaved wishes
into a marriage. Your noble husband
was King, and you, his queen
had no past beyond princess.

The silver weighting your wrists
cooled the burn from a time
you no longer remembered,
the burn the rapist's hands left
to silence your screaming.

Your king loved you, and you loved this,
and you loved his home.
You convinced yourself this was enough.
Your children were voices
crying *more, more*.
You could not listen.

You pulled your marriage around your shoulders,
curled into your silent bed.
You ignored the frayed edges
of your wishes, the holes stretched wider
every day, the chill finding your flesh.

3. The Divorce Dissolved Your Dreams

So many years collapsed
into that final second.
Your fairy-tale sank into earth,
you love fell in delicate pieces—
the petals of an enchanted rose.

You begged your magic mirror
to bring back the fairest princess.
The only reflection: your face,
grief creased into it
like the wrinkled pages
of a worn-out children's book.

4. After the Divorce

Your nightmares returned.
I could hear this
sleep-language of memories
chanting you back to the stained carpet
where he forced your legs apart
against the weight of your *no*
then your *please*
finally your silence.

You curled into this silence,
your inner world locked
in the fetal position.
You became a princess
without a voice.
Your fairy-tale marriage
opened a space in time
you could fill with silver and gold,
each day a perfect sunrise.

The magic was not strong
enough to carry you past your midnight.
I patted your forehead
with washcloth after washcloth
as you sweated your fear,
wished I could soak more
than your sweat, wished
I could turn your terror liquid,
strain my knuckles to send every drop
down the drain. I wanted
to blister my hands
to rid you of his clean-shaven face,
the beer on his breath.

When you whimpered, the windows
became a mother's eyes,
overseeing your sickness.
The moonlight tried to rouse you,
gathered itself into a thick knot,
a rope you could hang onto
before the torrent of your night world
sucked you beneath its waves.

Every night for weeks, I held you.
I do not know if you could feel me
reach into your secret storm,
hold you steady against the wind.
When you lost yourself
in this nightly time-travel,
I do not know if you could hear me
whisper to you, *remember*
this bed, this clean carpet,
these walls, these blue sheets,
my hands, your face, this bed.

5. *The Once-Princess Rides a Chariot of Spinning Wheels*

You were a limp doll,
your crown vanished,
your gown only rags.
Your fairy-tale marriage
had been written in iron.
It sapped all your strength
to close the pages of this fake magic.

You moved to a city you hated.
Your bed was a sleeping bag,
your heart shriveled to a raisin.

I held you as you cried
I am broken. I am broken.
The syllables wobbled out of you,
shaky baby-steps toward healing.
You pulled these words through your great wound
like dark thread. Each stitch
closer to whole made you wince.

We sipped tea beneath Georgia stars.
Sage: for wisdom, chamomile: for peace.
I tried to tell you, my friend
how brave you were, how stunning
your daily growth. *No* you said.
I keep circling the same center of pain.
I am only spinning.

You couldn't understand
that spinning is moving,
that circular motion is not the same thing
as no motion at all. *Like a car*, I told you,
spinning out of the mud.

You sat in my car, your face pressed
against the window. I held your hand
as we drove. *I miss him* you sighed.
Sometimes I want to go back.
Your own breath against the window
clouded your view of the world.

I am broken. I miss him. I am only spinning.
you cried each night, the floor hard

beneath your thin bag, beneath the weight
of so much grief. *I am only spinning.*
I said you were like a car,
but cars sit idle, cars reverse.

The clock's wheels spin,
and time circles forward.
I want to tell you, my friend
you are like time.
You are time, sacred as time.
Always moving forward,
arcing back to a new beginning.

Coping

North:

Become a tree.
Sink roots deep
into cool Earth.
Straighten your trunk,
dapple with moss.
Soak negative energy
until green, moist, and soft.
Unfurl leaves, dress
them yellow and red,
raise their heads to sky.

East:

Speak with birds.
Wipe the dust
from their traveled
feathers to touch
the trees in Canada,
the sand in Miami.
Touch and remember
there's always somewhere
that floats on the music
of the nightingale,
somewhere that bounces
with the raven's cackle.

South:

Set herbs on fire.
Smoke fear's white
ghosts away, breathe
the bright auras
of spirit guides.
Light a spiral
of red candles,
scatter darkness
with every flicker.

West:

Embrace the ocean.

Bathe yourself

in her arms, let her love

wash over you. Cry

against her shoulder

as white fingers

collect your tears

and set them sparkling.

Reading List

1. Where Water Comes Together with Other Water, Raymond Carver
2. Jersey Rain, Robert Pinsky
3. Canto General, Pablo Neruda (translated by Jack Schmitt)
4. What the Living Do, Marie Howe
5. Rose, Li-Young Lee
6. Sweet Machine, Mark Doty
7. Human Wishes, Robert Hass
8. Leaving Saturn, Major Jackson
9. The Fact of a Doorframe, Adrienne Rich
10. The Night Abraham Called to the Stars, Robert Bly
11. Museum, Rita Dove
12. Lucky Life, Gerald Stern
13. The Love Songs of Sappho, Sappho, translated by Paul Roche
14. Plums, Stones, Kisses, and Hooks, Ronald Wallace
15. Soul Train, Allison Joseph
16. Passing Through, Stanley Kunitz
17. Begin Again: Collected Poems, Grace Paley
18. Allah Mean Everything!, Amiri Baraka
19. Songs From This Earth On Turtle's Back: Contemporary American Indian Poetry,
Joseph Bruchac, ed.
20. The Best American Poetry, 2000, Rita Dove, ed., David Lehman, ed.