

2004

My Maiden Cowboy Names: Poems

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MY MAIDEN COWBOY NAMES:
POEMS

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

in

The Department of English

by

Victoria Brockmeier
B.S., Central Missouri State University, 2001
May 2004

for Kevin, who acted like I was a fact
right from the start of things

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	v
'	1
“before the dogtooth violets. . .”	2
cow tipping.....	3
lark: to thief as though in open country.....	5
flyover.....	6
work of laura.....	7
stitched along the shoreline	
i. going waterside.....	8
ii. suitable for framing.....	9
iii. phantom-limbed.....	10
iv. of jilting blood.....	11
lounge.....	12
year of the horse.....	13
phalaen/opsis.....	15
“she jumped right down. . .”	16
what the sun does to delicate skin.....	17
canto for a falling world.....	19
highschool sweetheart.....	21
why i have never yet written you lustful poems.....	22
mistress.....	24
singing so trees might follow.....	27
on five: a poem in tarot.....	29
red*star.....	31
“it wasn’t the first time. . .”	32
wilder out.....	33
shim-sham.....	36
fishy parts.....	38
on a boy named for war, enrolled in my afternoon comp class.....	39
carminae arcana	
vi. lovers.....	40
v. hierophant.....	41
iv. emperor.....	42
iii. empress.....	43
ii. priestess.....	44
i. magician.....	45
the space from polestar to dog star.....	46

“this way, if they came. . .”.....	48
thirteen ways of looking at kudzu.....	49
sub tropic zone.....	51
they are mountains they are hills.....	53
beneath thunder, the prairie	
i. honk for support.....	56
ii. from the wagon.....	57
iii. canticle for fiddle & drum.....	58
iv. thetis & vulcan in love.....	59
v. days gravid.....	60
vi. singer of tales.....	61
vii. an emancipation.....	62
medea.....	63
pastoral w/dirt under its fingernails.....	65
Letters of Permission.....	66
from <i>Arkansas Review</i>	67
from <i>Chautauqua Literary Journal</i>	68
from <i>Hammerpress</i>	69
from <i>Natural Bridge</i>	70
Vita.....	71

Abstract

On the title: for a dichotomy of vulnerability and resistance; for self as plural and/or changeable; for acts of claiming. To hint at tone, setting, and content. On sound: to shape a poem's mood, and because these pieces should leave your mouth a little tired if you read them out loud. On lineation: to highlight the near-misses in language—ambiguities, double meanings, troublesome literalization—and to see these not as pitfalls but as opportunities. On stanza and strophe breaks: if a stanza is a room, the breaks between must be doorways, and who wants to sit down and rest in a doorway? The aim is to stretch the reader across the distance, leave him/her hanging and anxious to get to the next words. The same strategy, less intensely, informs line breaks as well. On punctuation or its omission: used where pacing, voice, or logic require it, but otherwise considered unnecessary. On orthography: at times because it's redundant (the words should signal beginnings and ends of thoughts regardless of capitalization); at times because capitalizing proper nouns signals an impossible surety of reference (who understands America enough to claim they're describing it completely and accurately?). Additionally, to encourage ideas to collide. On the lowercase *i* specifically: this isn't about autobiography, but about writing good poems. Perspective changes as the writing dictates; be wary. On voice: bifurcated, bilocated, liminal in identity (say, an ex-carney holding a one-woman picket line) and method (fragmentation; juxtaposition; ellipsis; word play). Passionate and linguistically lush. On why: not to break the rules of discourse, but to break them open, exposing what's inside.

,

sing in me, muse, of the bits left out
corners & the cobwebs swept from them
the heath-woman let be by roman spears
& lutheran fires, sing of the woodbine

weeding its way through her garden,
her porch, topped with slant tin & holed
up in landlocked mountains that gravel
roads etch over, curving up & back,

each grassy middle ridged in an invitation
to fallen leaves & the slime molds moving
through the entrapped cool; fill me with
every snipped-out *o* & open my throat

with the round aria trilled by the earthed-over,
by blood washed to blush through gravel
then dwindling clear in a creek, by bones
scattered, witnessing to the land's kept breach

ninefold lady of harp, mix these round bodies
in mine & in the alchemy of light let in
pour them forth: frayed, canting chorus
so many tongues, so many startled throats

“before the dogtooth violets (which, of course,
were yellow or white and not violet at all)
pushed up their spotted leaves”

cow tipping

you'd never think they'd tumble
the way they do, tame as a vase of sunflowers
knocked off a table. or how heavy

the sound is, how complex—you feel it
in your ribs as shoulder hits the earth

before haunch. how long they take
getting up. how their eyes give back
the whole moon, the shabby clouds

tearing themselves up to get to dawn,
& they have to heave themselves up,

give it a couple tries. the grasses pulse
with crickets, katydids, fingernail-sized frogs,
all that *come on, come on* swimming in mist,

then upwards, & you'd never know. unless you resist
the adrenaline & step back only a few feet

after pushing, hard, at that angus bulk—
you'll never feel your hands tingle, palms
printed with bristly hair, never notice how the hide

is cold with dew at first but instantly
warm beneath, instantly mammal,

never get the shock in your wrists
from toppling a near half-ton of muscle
wrapped over bone. you have to hold yourself

in air that slips across your skin
like charmeuse, let your shoes

sink into the turf a little as the head
swings around, drunk with broken sleep
like any animal, puffing out rank milk breath.

when it finally gains its hooves,
it could charge, pulp your suddenly fleshy frame,

that weight could shatter your clavicle like a branch
split away from a log & already chewed
by termites. you'd never see, though,

unless you hung around, how after it rises
it only shuffles its hocks through the pasture,

the mist, the hasty, winged bugs,
to surround itself with luminous, breathing backs.

lark: to thief as though in open country

soft, tapered fingers & knuckles, smooth, still
a bit dimpled: her hands could belong
to any eleven-year-old. she watches bones ripple
her skin from beneath as she picks over

mounded pints of blackberries, inky
with sun hidden inside. swollen, shining fruit;
meadow scent; warm from midmorning. to buy
something so perishable. to lose an afternoon

in the tang of new-from-the-cane, electric
& smart in her mouth. the breakable black.
to savor a few but find mold rising between the rest
like slow fog from the river to its banks.

once she crossed its headwaters on tiptoe,
dark, northern water that had swirled rock into knots
& that tasted of clover when she took a palmful
to her tongue. too-young fingers flick one berry,

another, up her cuff. only what can be dropped
up a sleeve, what can be carried without bruising.
what makes for half an hour out, eaten perched
above that brown beast of a river. plainspeaking smile,

quick, so they'll watch her eyes & not her hands. skins
tauten, then slip back from each pocket of pulp & juice,
bloody as red in her mouth, but always a little green
in even the blackest fresh fruit. they've waited

as long as they could, stripped from their tangled
canes & at the far edge of ripe: to have their tart
boiled thick, sugared down, slurred into quart jars?
what comes unsealed. what can't be packed away.

flyover

“Follow us.”—USAF 509th bomb wing motto

clumsy, busty, july afternoon, & two shortalled girls
shampoo a boy’s hair with dirt. shutter. shutter.
my caption will read, “future cosmetologists

take their first customer.” it will read, “daughter
of tsgt. jacob anders. . . daughter of lt. anne mchenry
. . . son of sgt. felix vasquez.” dottie will titter
in the public affairs office. but a steady growl

through the earth, or the air, & one glossy wing
arrows through the haze of cut pasture, looping
perfect cursive eeee’s against clouds & the cocksure blue

overhead. a teacher in a corduroy skirt tilts up
the few too-dreamy faces so no one will miss—
what? how to describe the simple, inky black,
the cartoon edge, knowing what load it bore?

shutter. “stealth shows off for its youngest fans.”
a few years back, though, just up the highway:
a thousand-some kids dragged jacketless

from second period to shiver as november rasped
across our cheeks. clouds above heavy
& seamless as pewter, the air forcing ice

into the ends of our lungs. a slack, unified “ooh”
at the flat wedge roaring toward us, its launch
straight up. “local students,” the caption read,
“observe.” we headed in without a cue; we had notes
to pass. stiff fingers to clench & unclench.

shutter. shutter. sun sparkles from big, dark eyes;
shines on new teeth. shutter. teacher’s hand
strokes bright curls. shutter. shutter. angular scrap
of something larger, black notch cut out of the day.

work of laura

o diary my dear, o sacred lines. my words
are not homage enough, my lettering ragged
& blowzy, long l's & h's that approach
the ascetic—does this suffice?

o mother confessor. charlatan under breeze.
last week i hit 100 but am back down. my bones
are of iron, thick & oiled grey, weighting me
to this crust. plebia. turf where cattle

shuffle their muddy hocks. it would help
if i were finely-drawn, like a chariot for daphne,
an angel's blood, drawn, like the glowy curtains
around a pope joan sitting for her communion

with the god's body. i am eating only the slenderest
flowers: this is sympathetic magic. nasturtiums
are the hottest & soon i will burn my way out. will be blue
& black & white only, my calligraphic body, angles

the color of ink on a page. this is my devotion:
spartan hands, long line of shoulder to wrist studded
halfway by the alien sculpture of elbow. point
of hip, temple hollow; this is clarity, a climb.

i don't want to write about blood, but it is thick
& still an inevitability. began today
to wean my veins over to light & breath.
i will be beautiful when i am gone.

prāna: the breath of god. i'll exhale light
like the moon breathing out her reflection
blow these tattered limbs away from the pure
filament beneath. shrapnel, ad astra. when i am thin

as silk i will float & ripple; you'll see—
stars peeping through my skin, stretched & scraped
to vellum. i'll fold myself to wallet-size
& slip between your pages.

stitched along the shoreline

i. going waterside

the kid was eight and she sympathized with frogs,
their smallness, their wetness, their croaky throats.
she could watch them just breathe, their sides out

& in & out, how their lungs must fill their whole
bodies. she could find them under leaves where shade
kept their skins' damp. some were the size of her thumbnail,

some her fist. she believed bullfrogs to be jazz singers
gone to heaven; she knew how the tails shrunk
up into legs & thought, they are only small mermaids.

the kid enjoyed frogs as pest control, would forego
citronella for her host of wide mouths & sticky
snapping tongues. she muddied her knees in the creek

& crawdads shifted in their holes, ruffling
their plated bodies, waving antennae
as her socks soaked up rust from the water.

ii. suitable for framing

pearly blue-grey, jewel greens & teals, the wet-looking
black stripes: colors for nailpolish, or for the long
breathing body of a dragonfly. the girl admired their dart,

their hover, & most of all their talons—not one clasp
wasted. what union of edge with curve. when thrum
meant envy, when summer meant droves

of softer bugs, dizzy, possessed & devoured. weaving
tail, skim across cattails, yarrow, spiderwort
tickling the smooth belly, high gorgeous keen

of air forced through carapace. the girl learned
to glitter in motley, to captivate with sheened eyes
that didn't blink, & wordlessly she prayed for wings,

hard & clear as ice, pulsing with black veins. bound
to her own swelling hips, she leaned into the wind on each pure
moment of predation. the impersonal dive, the dodge.

iii. phantom-limbed

three driveways down, the cousins—younger
& all male—had brawled a noon sun down
into the last deep shades of evening, & the horizon,

black against a ruddy sky, attested to fire gone below
the world. the woman followed ragged echoes
to the woodpile, where gravel warmed her feet

with summer soaked in, & in the dust she found a scrap
of lizard's tail, scabbed over, ashen on its underside
& brown above. she twiddled it between her thumb

& first two fingers, the pliable skin, ridged
where stripes had already faded; the bones, smaller
than thread. is it true, she wondered, do they grow back?

a skritch of claws, & she caught the whirr
of a forked tongue, & twin brief streaks,
vivid on a dark body darting over splotches of lichen.

iv. of jilting blood

when she'd been younger, she'd kept turtles
in a wire pen no higher than her knees when she bent
to feed them—cantaloupe rinds & other uncomposted

ends of meals. she named one blueberry, for being the size
of a muffin, and others for their muscled humors
for digging, sinew, & green. orbit, frobozz, roxy, napoleon,

trubble. she believed in the muscled hinge across each chest.
their shells, she knew, were not like stone, for being full
of pulses that rose to the sun, for being mazy yellow & black

or brownish like cheap jade. slice of stump propped on rocks
& they congregated there; sand & they dug in with soft eggs
that as a girl she'd crushed. no more shell than ripe plums.

worn now from the twinges of child gone to wet shatter,
she smarted through the boundary between her body
& night: why not be plated, bury herself in winter mud.

lounge

you raised a sly invite to get my audience
rapt beneath you, yielded & breathing
to the count of four—the sharp cage corners
where my ribs & hips dig away at the mattress.

you knew i would come, all protest & pretense;
you've seen me die down at a whisper
with so much night & neon, the broken music
in my bones, your fingers rolling out a snare

rhythm, binding, electric, on course & amped
like mad. dive me into the arpeggios drawn out & out
over my vertebrae riffs. sure & patient, soften
the stark ivory of my back, the fifty-two

rigid white keys of bruises healed & scars
gone pale; those grave black half-steps
would weep raw if struck, & we'd wail
genuine & point-blank, shatter out the windows

if you walked onstage & took the mike
i would be as i am now, a brittle rest
between bars of some knob-jointed blues;
i will not be sung. later tonight as your last

loitering chords ebb off across town, i'll wake,
breathing with the beat your heart sets me
my breasts will ache from the caffeine & i will write
these words for you: we both are barren of voice.

year of the horse

a circle back a canter this is my year to seep
caves brood under all this town the gauntlet
i never ran rather shrugged through

i'll set up camp in the wet dark down & under
with the murk ghosts the grated-up speakeasies
with the cold & the leavings of bats

dig in with a mangled spoon & the tallow tapers
tom & becky left behind i will bury
your ordinances your forbiddances the thump

of your off-season wal-mart shoes trust
in my stainless steel to overcome from beneath
your downtown that shuts down nightly by nine

a subterranean crusade nostrils flared to catch
the sharp scent of the ready-to-surrender
my fury is stale: an arabian warmare given to the bit

for the men who never speak but through their teeth
who do not ask to pry open some girl giving way
button by bend, doomed like a mine shaft

for the women whose glossy nails quarry red vinyl
from the booths at the corner café who kneel
before their daughters' bedroom doors

this is the year my eyes turn white to match the crowdads'
& those of the translucent fish as i scrape out lime
with percheron strength battered flatware & little grace

each grind of steel on stone a smirk that will vibrate
through the sewer pipes & make your showers stutter
to the dull edge of this spoon my steady pick

my hands will chafe from gritty mud
in the grey-green night under all missouri
i will mine the earth's ripe structure for its strength

your houses will tumble the cobblestones
crumble in the gingerbread & smeary storefronts
the stained glass in your uncatholic churches

your bridesmaid theory of friendship the speaking tears
that trail veiled glee down your cheeks
i will pitch our courthouse down to its gouty knees

may its top-tower stand cockeyed
for my monument my headstone my battered rome
i will not leave this place unmarked

phalaen/opsis

after Stevens

in the cluttered room where books pile
mostly to the ceiling & slants of paper
scatter over desk, then shuffle down to bury
the pens & shiny bits of metal dropped
to the floor, a clay pot takes dominion

over a pulped, pressed wilderness, sits tall
atop ragged compendia of stars, opiates
& bridgebuilding. the big, lazy leaves
splay out, overrunning the bare edge to catch
what upslanted slats admit: the mildest light.

from the leaves out pierce roots that clamber,
grasp like fingers, like ore, & breathe & hold
& drink in slow, slow hunt. waxy, the grey-green
of moss in caves made smooth, crooked
& reaching like every other part for more

of what they've got. the one stem rises, arcs
toward blunted sun, damper air, through burls
& tiny outgrown sheaths til six blooms & one
swelled near to bursting pull it into a zigzag,
wanting bees, unharbored here where dust

drifting only mimes their gyres. petals unfurl
til taut, several kinds of round, so snowy
they glitter, hold tracks, & innermost a tiger
grinning beneath the great clitoral nub
(but between, the curved & recurved

inner lips, a sudden raspberry, a moth, a splash,
a blown tent; a spotted-backed angel, wings
& broad gown spread wide, spindling
line-thin to two curled tails: up, back, up, out,
& yet more up, keen for hotter climes).

“she jumped right down to the paddlewheel
& rode its fins toward the water”

what the sun does to delicate skin

the girls of savannah are sad they pace
the graceful rows down abercorn
down liberty down drayton & bay

tending to the propriety of their habits
never a curl slipped down never blowsy
smeared mislaid or torn

their men stroll about chests broad & arms loose
smiling with beery ease
the women here hold their men hold

their tongues with long nails & sharp eyes
both that glitter through clouds
of elegant winter breath

& these girls are left sex-sore & ragdolled
without yield fronted by cashmere & leather
by the gravest eyes & most joyless smiles

men collect in savannah brandies pistols
women of slender hips investments
displayed for the best company

a side street a loud-crowded bar an anniversarial couple
out post-baby approached by a real motherless son
of the south tall crowned with hair the color of red earth

a ceremonial master of this city's steeping heritage
beneath his words he says *i had your wife*
when she was something to have i broke her

& then made her wild again
she crunches ice like the wingbones of black birds
swallows oblivion before it consumes the room

the girls of savannah learn from their dead
to bear abandon a skeptical regard through the bars
of their holiday-hall-decked cemeteries forebears raised up

installed in small mansions to oversee their rot
evergreen draped at the gates with red & gold ribbon
means *life eternal* means *rebirth* means

yes we know you're all watching us yet
in savannah the dead are a city centerpiece
gold locket & carved cameos on fine

necklace chains fettered about shapely necks
birthlines keep heads & eyelids lowered
the canny girls of savannah study tourists

for the chance to claim their men or the grace
hid in foreign hands claiming is what they do
pray for the arsenic behind their smiles

canto for a falling world

no mother no blessing no incarnation
this is simply rain pleasant & unsettling
as a vague smile blind it washes over
sludgy foundations cinder blocks
bared to the sky slicks over tiled roofs

that may stay bright a decade ten even
but no more & in the same way it loosens
roots' & leaves' hard edges

i want to tell you how primal it is how
untranslatable the descent through trees
waving just as they do when the sun is above
& nearly white just as if breeze
moved in these branches & not rain

the big frondy mimosas bloomed with pink
starbursts the live oaks all out of scale
tiny leaves on overgrown branches
that risk splintering for their bulk
crusted over brown with resurrection fern

cypresses stiff-limbed & austere
with bark brittle even soaked & magnolias
with dark leaves splayed like hands

no steel god or valkyrie here no torrent
nor sting no twisters blast of lightning
in the wind no deep rolling thunder
only nearly silent a flood rising

over the ankles over the curb between toes
& baring the tender violation of earth by roots
the air lush as forests are lush rich
with ease with a sense of void you can feel
the millions of years trickling
through your hair unearthly earthly you want to think
remedy you want to think gift

that this storm comes with care
for the parched swamp the people
who need to breathe to just watch windows
steam up & sidewalks turn to beds
for dull amber creeks

but no vengeance here & no absolution
no glory in wet excess but the tailings
of a hurricane spending itself acres inland
simply & profoundly rain like nothing else

older than prayer older than dread or wonder
the straight down fall the aimlessness
under the groggy grey sky
& all this plummeting mist

highschool sweetheart

after seven months of hard hands & dry sheets,
my pleas folded into pearly baths, a stolen
garter belt, skin glitter, & to no end; came an afternoon

i met him at my door naked but for pinky-gold skin
& my three feet of hair, when it still pegged me
as a blonde. i hungered to hear my pulse at spine
in my own ears, in the joints in my hands, to flow thick

as the ruddy buckwheat honey i'd spilled once
onto his ankle, hot from morning on its stony pot.
i mostly remember his stare duller than marbles,
his voice wilted like he'd left it in his pocket.

split from him now for six years, my spine
remains shaded by low brown, gaunter to see than it feels
which i have to speak as, yeah, he had some problem

with beds. couches too. i gave him eight dollars
to buy me roses & hung them from my bedroom vent
where they spun a little, blooms down

so i could watch them wither while he pressed
a tongue clumsy with smoke behind my teeth
& of course between my legs. i swore
i could feel grime smutting me up, cold & grey

til i could have been thrown on a wheel
& never known different. i stayed low on slickery
the whole two years plus, like a long autumn

where the wind rattled leaves over pavement
& windowpanes; where whole fields of corn stalks
clacked together at night, gibbering & dumb.

why i have never yet written you lustful poems

because you are a much-too-much celebrity
on the luminous screen stretched over my mind.
because the most beautiful boys dying in havana
burning up blood first with the elegant ills of love

gone sour have nothing on you, not for sheen of skin
or guarded depth of eye or gesture in the educated
bones of your hands. because serifs, though protrusive,

have not the warmth nor the delicacy of fingertips,
not the drag down skin over spine, that naughty, rippled
channel, the tinted swells into which you translated

my ribs. because fifteen years ago another michael
became someone who would become my first failure
at being a girl; because even if you did prove my angel
of tall dark and handsome sex magick, i am already leaning

to loss of my faith in love as balm, as lift, as pastiche of the stars'
constellation code, as fae-tonguing-mule's-ear secret.
because then, it was cheating, & now it's only the impossible

memory of your arms, their lines & smell like desert
under thunder. because i never thought you'd remember
my cats' names, i never thought to invite you to claim me
when you danced me through your taut quadrille

of ink & charcoal, when the floor kept records
of our rainy footsteps for months. because the pedestal
i have you on is too pretty to knock down: callas

brushed chrome twined across moony limestone
from the ocean's leaving behind its tears. because
i wouldn't keep you from the city for even the dream—
this is currency, this is life scraped raw & bandaged

—that you fill your hands with lather & my swathes
of hair, that you need not be told. because after my last
encounter with pavement & velocity, i am missing

a few bones & simply reluctant to splurge on hope
when steel pins are so cheap. because you're all i want
for christmas. because i am still at risk to make you

the cliché of ease in a Sunday paper, the laughter
in this delta dark that fills only part of the hard America
between you & me & let's be crazy kinds of young.

mistress

you lap between my legs & leave me
sodden tasting of puddles you drop-dead
nordic thin odalisque with your eyes

blue as blood without breath so with a low sigh
out dribble letters & spaces leaving my chest
feverish hollow tramped through & while
i'm dutifully up late rattling out vespers
at 75 words per minute you're thrashing
your long pretty legs around some art boy

tense jaw long body fingers adept
at tracing the human form screams joined
shuddering up through the net woven
by stars & the stories that link them

don't you fucking smile at me
your eyes blue as breath gasped out against
that first solo december morning that cold
cold clear dawn & i guess i'm starting over again help
me put off knowing it's over help me scribble
my dark blood out gotta get some room
in these lungs don't you smile at me

when i can't remember the last time
i wrapped my fingers around anything long hard
& smooth that didn't lay down a good
quiet line of ink i would mute myself
for a life on the other side of the page

you cunt as in cunning ken knowledge as in unrevealed
your breasts perfect as numbers your white hands
oval nails & big friendly moons all i say is give me
a share you beguiler of everything sour strong & underspeched
get me laid i swear i'll be a better writer i promise

i miss the rigid salt of cock pressed
into my tongue the big channel bulging into me
& beating the summoning-up of self & giving over
to my cunt god you goddess i'd have been you
if i'd been born bathed in grace linear
draped in & over chalked-down orisons

on that couch in that painting hung

where a rawboned sun touches it only
in the hibernating part of the year

but i'm round i'm yellowy i cling
lack your scent like damp pages
like coffee stale at four a m can't move
my hips as if i were a river silting out
its mucky benediction thanked
with a hoarse reedy whisper

whatever color your skin may be you are dark
as what rains in my dreams shifty & fey
as no answers here & so they all want
to do you they want to put it right
through to the top of your skull & you smile

at me when i am tight & channeled through
pretending black on white lines will fill me
waves of ink across paper trying to get at the blurry
bleary smoggy questions inside you all the lovely boys

digging at it with fingers in clay bow drawing moans
from cut-gut strings ballpoint pressed
against paper your white body their desperate
sweaty near-victories & i lay in bed like ophelia

off-key astrain missing things i never had:
spots on the sheets & all of them black
absence black slatternly benediction
from o my lady of song & no sex for the sallow
& cheeks smooth as snow no lines

from inarticulate nights twisting leg against leg
praying give me an answer to cool the crave
or give me give me a good regular violent fuck
spots on my sheets & all of them black

you every wet sacred place
all the keen glittery eyes staring
through me up to your peaktop temple
the spring & so near the sun you leave
their wrecked wings in my care i pray

don't smile at me you bitch give me one
one good ride to see me through but you just feed me

more lines you cunt you rotten cunt

singing so trees might follow

“ain’t no latins in the heartland, darlin,”
tendered around a cigarette’s trunk
before you tapped ash toward poison ivy leaves

near your hip-waders. like europa
never hung out laundry, never stretched
her summered arms up just to get closer

to the sun’s bawdy corus before zeus
hauled her off. or after. like aeneas
never got in a barfight when some *latro*

branded his mother’s thighs as laved-over
& not from her spummy birth. “leave the greeks
in greece is all. poems about daddy & jesus,

good enough for me.” since you did see thomas
wipe his cheek, you heard him blame the sun,
a spur over christ’s skinny shoulder,

& the dust it boiled up with ravin winds.
eggplant & old gold, this sky, echoing
from horizon to horizon over blackbirds

picking snails from the clay shore
where, yeah, we got willows, corkscrew & black,
that pale once evening dims in close

around them; we got oak trees whose leaves
spangle creek waters with scraps of rust,
jasper, other minerals that shouldn’t float,

only once winter shrugs out of the valleys,
which can indeed occur at lupercal & does
if the grain mother eases up early.

like nobody packed their metamorphoses
west, or named their sons cletus or virgil
for the swing in those thin wails. your eyes pale

& broken like bits of bottle glass, &, “sure
you’re from around here, doll?” laughing
how foxes bark; stubbing out the cigarette.

i burrowed my bare toes into wet ground
shot through with roots, leaned back
til the half-bared skin over my spine met

crumbling bark on a cedar, yes, worthy
of lebanon, breathed to admit its dark perfume
into my blood. some great-great-great of mine,

visigoth, knew: empire belongs to whose tracks
muddy the streets. i nodded. sure. as a heron tossed
up a sunfish & swallowed the lump of it down.

on five: a poem in tarot

five is the planet that used to be green. bacteria hides
now in its dirty red ice: no cities remain, no philosophers.
the chaos body that skis across the sky, drunken
& blood-mad, careens (now direct, now retrograde,
swoops, slurred tracks) at speeds beyond the necessary—

mars lives in a five-sided house where he plans his coup
of olympus, how he will take them after their indolent dinner,
fat with ambrosia, sloppy & folded over one another;
how he'll shred their fine white togas & hang the rags
from the villa porticoes. a fine & hideous surrender.

five legs on a table is one too many. mars barks
his shin there & unnails the offending limb, lathes
from it a club which he hangs by his belt, by his sweaty
leg, then picks splinters from under his nails. a craftsman
with no pity for the whine of turned wood.

five wands thrust in from all directions, rebuking
the compass; fire is closest to mars's heart & in this suit
he sets everyone at odds: you are unable to free yourself
while streets crumble, glass cracks & rebar bares itself.
allies are unavailable or unknown. expect difficulties.

in cups we read more spilled than won—the raw heart.
you may find yourself praying for the drowned, for the rage
that knocks over glasses, for burgundy staining linen. skeletons
trip from dumbwaiters & back bannisters. mars in his cups
is full of regret, wants a fireside, tends to petulance.

swords speak: lines in sand, a language between hiss & sing,
voice urgent & rasped. these five have learned to lie, incited
by an ember thirst for strategy. beware the touch of mars:
flawed metal or rust that runs under oil & polish. knots
remain tangled, wind offers no aid but casual judgment.

& pentacles: five coins struck in a base metal at the direction
of mars as general. each one seals out the ravenous winter,
the ragged poor who stagger blind or crouch, unheard;
tears freeze on their chapped lips, they have stopped shuddering.
the five of pentacles shows an unfortunate lack of charity.

when pressed, mars admits to a higher guise: the hierophant,

the innocent, the sage savant, the buddha-boy swaddled
in rustling priestly robes. he speaks truths he doesn't need
to understand. beware, though, his jeweled ears, his even teeth,
his stolen wife & pocket change. mars favors territory.

red*star

222 Laurel St., Baton Rouge, LA

here's plaster, cracked last time the swamp shifted
beneath this ghost town downtown. red lights,
kgb-style, swing above the bar like thirsty aeronauts

as someone in long flared pants bends forward
to read the stiff jukebox pages turning
one button-press at a time. a bony right hand

angles a cigarette away from a girl's waist, skirt
slouched down around her hips: leather
on leather as he leans her into him & talks

into her ear. & while the night rises
over us in smoke & juke noise, a man sinks
into velveteen depths. if he's lucky,

someone will stumble across his knees,
someone with big eyes & an unsteady
giggle, maybe that one with the ponytail

jeweled to her scalp. she'll spill her whisky sour,
maybe not even notice how his face sags
like it's hung by a nail, or how maths glare

in his eyes. she'll follow him like a map.
i'm just waiting for the lights to come up, give
my high heels an excuse to carry me

into cool air & laughter dying off. outside, a sky lit
mostly from below, & when i go to my car, rain
piling up in roundels on the windshield.

“it wasn’t the first time
she’d sealed up a gas tank with maple syrup”

wilder out

i made my first dollar pulling a calf
one squally predawn, the waxy caul over its face
white as the frost tatted around the seam
of each hickory nut that swung overhead, storm

heaving in & us some miles from the shed.
i made my next evading a tower of glassware
that tried to fall on me. pouring coffee
for standups no funnier than the three-year-olds
sick on wine from gallon bottles who'd pitch back

into trays of seamy glassware & ruin, the bride said,
the whole reception. napkins in fan folds
or christmas trees or tiny clothigami boxes

like unpainted kites; once i showed them to my mother
she made every drawer into a puzzle board
full of geometries unsuited for laundry. drought years,

we had, & i ended up fishing a dead kitten
out of the cattle tank. old ladies whose skin
was powdery cool even without talcum

paid me to bring them lipsticks in pinks
named carnation ice, honey rose, cranberry spice—
botanicals the earth never grew. their eyeshadows
were all some blue or some other mauve, like bruises

muted to match the curtains, & they'd buy
any hand cream i could push, if i left samples.
this til i pushed up a truck bumper
by four inches & learned to putty & sand
& shape with a flimsy body file, terra cotta dust

a coat of dry on my tongue, inside my cheeks, darker
where i sweated to a color i could have sold
as hibiscus south, if i'd made it back in town.

when i did head out, & out, i boarded & bedded
as far as i could on silver glint & bangles of ivory,
the river's banks like dark smudges straight
down the country's middle, my maiden cowboy names:
nanci spurs, muriel the glove, tornado julia. i wore them

out of season like suede boots, like hoopskirted dresses
with matching hats. played a saloon a few weeks
one winter, set up on a stage made of empty tables
& hollered out torchy tunes over a half-tuned piano.
they called me bethanie stardust. never missed a nickel.

came that i served three turns in a drizzle & grim circus,
the ringmaster's satin hat natty with snags, the elephants
muttering & stubborn, the lady at her bright wheel
tight around the mouth. she said she'd change me

into a grain of corn & let me be ground
down to flour. i shuffled. dealt. tied back
my ashes of gold hair to let the inside light
kindle over the lines where fate writes

her cramped hand across ours. the lady billed me
as sosostris' younger daughter, born
with a veil, imperfectly pale from welsh
witches' blood in my bavarian veins. scrygirl

to women with brittle hair, with crinkles
at their eyes from smiling like divinity,
saccharine & dissolving. to younger girls

whose fathers waited outside, blubbery in overalls
& nothing else, white hair tufting from under
arms gone fallow after years of farming
only halfheartedly. to the odd man come to my cabin
just for cards. too long at the edge

of the same town & i had to shut the door:
i do not heal comas. voice honed. the hospital
is across the way, & call. lighting candles
anyway; watching sparks vanish into rings

in a pot of dark tea. three turns til i snapped
an axle in a town where even the dead get housed
in dressed stone, & under our feet

nothing but miles down of neither water nor mud
& so both. headed maybe for the yucatán, or on down
to the incan roads shot through the rainforest

where you can run & only stop where your breath
has to trail back to you from the peaked air.
but first i've got to pidgin my way
into one of these shotguns, got to get a floor

to wax so when i lay down to study on the maps
pinned to the ceiling, it'll be smooth as mowed grass
under me. got to set a sundial into the lawn.
hand me your twill, i'll dart a jacket

out of it. give me that tin & a box of nails
& i'll toss you up a building. brew you a tonic
for three years' pleurisy. whatever keeps my boots
soled, or puts me in the occasional velvet stitch,
what folds or asserts its jingle on the palm.

shim-sham

936 Montegut St., New Orleans, Louisiana

rust bubbles beneath moon-colored paint, swelling
joints on one of many gingerbread iron railings
decking a street where water held by air unknits
all bounded decency. i'm out here with february

on my skin, naked but for gauzy stockings & twisty braids
unraveling to haze over my shoulders. i am twenty-five
tonight. dinner was lovely—low lights like miniature stars
in wine, cassis, asparagus crested along the plate

like a bird of paradise—lovely. even my brünhilde
shoulders looked graceful, bones laid together
beneath skin dusted with mica as though it wanted
to shine starlight, streetlight, back up at the sky.

he's in love, & not with me, & wants to borrow my car
to visit her in another state. breeze stirs the upper tree limbs
like fingers tangling in a stranger's hair, and straight below,
the stirring, slurry swamp only just holds back

from heaving us all into the gulf. oh, lady nola, i hate you
tonight. your big smile, big belly, your thighs sloppy
any time of day or night, & your panting. the half a country
i moved across to get to you, the eaten-away roads,

the gilt. ecstasy indeed. blackened spoons, rolled dollar bills,
packets & powders & pills, & always more down here
in your dirty deep south. jazz that used to walk its bass
up my spine & out my ribcage blares now across the little grey

of predawn, chattery piano, that miserable insecure bastard
of a trumpet won't let any of us get any rest. croon. swoon.
scream like judgment day. smile with your red-rimmed eyes,
then stumble to a bed, somewhere. i want this concrete

damp & anaesthetic under me so after a while
i won't even be able to feel the grit. i want the moon
staring down as dull clouds scud across her pale
cheek. inside, near-silence as he mops up a flood

of cabernet that darkened & reddened the dark & red
stripes of his old wood floor. february. on my skin.
i imagine her smooth, punky, repressed. i imagine her
grinning at him & him grinning back, his elegant jaw

tingling beneath her surer, faster fingertips, her slender calves
& ankles tight as their bellies press together. i imagine
he doesn't think of me last weekend in my trinkety
bedroom, velvet-robed, tearing up, & lungs drummed

with the sobbing. i imagine he doesn't think. tomorrow,
lady of all-night nights, i'll escape your quarter, its air
always soaked in vomit, cheap perfume & cheaper booze,
& head to some suburban temple of commerce, listen

to my bootheels on the marble floors, be draped in fresh linen
by murmuring attendants. i want to stroke the cool,
unmoving pillars & sit by the fountains. new silk thong,
diamond in my nose, something—make me beautiful again.

fishy parts

one slippery spark, you called me, electric eel, even
to the long fins, the touch turned to stun, even to the kelpy
taste. you couldn't stand how i'd flood your rooms
with my woman stink—sun on limestone, juniper

berry, sea spray—& leave them shiftier, draped
in chains. you never trusted my puddle-flat eyes,
puddle-round, their color changing like weather.
when you saw my gills pulsing open & closed

in air they couldn't take in, my fins struggling
to heave me upright on sand as sharp & bright
as milled steel, impotent against the bulk gravity
makes of my belly-pale body, you only tossed

a bucket of cloudy seawater over me. pisces, you said,
you're drowning us both. & maybe i was, spilling out
over myself, tidal, salt pools bleared in my wake
across your polished floor, the press of my flesh

left soaked into your sheets: now you're trekking inland,
finger tracing roads on a crisp new map. never once
did you follow me to the right rocky coasts
where i split my tail into two legs & climb ashore.

on a boy named for war, enrolled in my afternoon comp class

chest light & empty, legs feeling as though they're still
learning to walk: you must understand i can make no answer
here. you lean low over me like the appled tree but broad-shouldered
like adam. slender spikes of hair, gelled this morning, curl

over your forehead; one hand half-wraps the corner of my desk
& your scent warms the air between us, part bull musk, part hay.
one fingertip rises to your lips, denting their angel curve
as you watch me read—black ink scrawled, but carefully,

into quatrains: all lips & skin, sweat, & how you dream,
& my legs, the one line each from hip to toe. a light like steel
on flint flares in your eyes, momentary, momentary,

& in any other world, i would have you, too. what hours
you must have spent, eyelids atremble, seeing my body “cradled
like a dolphin in her own ocean” in those muscular arms.

carminae arcana

vi. lovers

after i left, you befriended the chief of police
who told you over rounds tossed back at old barney's
how my brash, blind *haa-aahs* had earned me
a file three addresses & four boyfriends long:
cars full of cops listening beneath my windows

for the barebacked edge between sex
& something less rapturous. but then none showed

for our one real fight—& even that was all words:
the march night brutal with grains of ice
in its wind, muscular, plunging through my legs.
gouty blood there partly frozen to arrow
weakly at jeans tangled around my ankles,
& me screaming *you wanna fuck*

then let's fuck goddammit screaming
let's wake somebody the fuck up so you can
show me off throaty & screaming give them
the goddamn show let's light this place up

i got dizzy, hot in the face & chest where my voice
came from, weightless but dense. the sky split
overhead into a frail dawn; tears itched down my cheeks
to pool above my collarbone, & lower, denim
puddled in frozen mud, broken-off grass.

v. hierophant

my eyes green in a mirror with darker rings
at each iris' edge, flecked with brown,
grey & gold; then behind me, yours

nearly the same. sixty-odd years cumulate
between us, all reckoned down one black autumn night

to my arms around your calves, belly flat to the floor
with what drag i had & could it hold
against the scotch, the rifle's weight, whatever you could get

from the houston night, could gravity
help keep safe your ex-wife, the lawyer
in her bed—would we all just fold

& break like dry-rotted boards?
barely, no, but new year's, your eyes beyond
focusing on mine, voice splintered. *before all the gods*

i marry you. gravel shifting under your cowboy boots
as you slouched toward me. *i goddamn marry you*
& me suddenly sober, saying anything to get us back

to the hotel. wet grass somewhere, tree bark
grating into my cheek. taking a whole cherry pie
up to our room. then morning, & would you look
at that, her footprints still greased on the windshield.

home, & winter, & burnt to the bones.

iv. emperor

nothing broken, or breaking, but my heart so full
it bulged against my ribcage & forced blood
into my mouth. tight like steel bending

i whispered *son of a bitch* because i'd met
your mother, witnessed her vampish posture,
her glances like light through blue glass, avian hug.
wet smiling cunt. i'd seen pictures of her from age
fourteen, thirteen, lush in her arms & everywhere

& her eyes as old as they were ever going to get.
this was when i showed you my swollen lips,
too raw to cry or even piss, the damp shade
& texture of an african violet's petals, thoroughly welted

by what you swore meant luxury, what had worn your jeans
white at the zipper. i could reek from cutting back
the hedge, could ache like my gut was rusting out

while i sat still, didn't matter. you said i got you going
just like a old junkyard dog & i'm supposed
to smile. sometimes i'd try, my chest slicked

with your sweat & curled hairs. in the window-light
across the room, pages of my words fanned out
ready for your pen. you could barely hide
how your shoulders strutted out.

iii. empress

dream: gazebo in marsh, air rank with pollen
& the breathings-out of mold, yellow yellow sun
painting my arms & legs. the fact of a small crowd
of less importance than the sand & dew

creeping up my dress, antique white, the fact
of sunlight second to that of breeze, the damp drag
of hem across calf, drag & back as ankles
meet water at its surface & then my hand

into another. yes, i wake heady & warm.
he's a recovering accountant now staining cold press
with colored inks; awake, he wants nothing

with me. i did read his palms. yes. as if i shouldn't wish
to feel young for a change after the heavy-hipped age
i wore to tend you. dream: your arms
around my shoulders, your shoulder still

the wrong height, fingers princressing the seam
of my spine. in your living room, my matter-of-fact
breaking open all over you, your rough coos, the cloy

in your voice. the same voice smaller
on the phone: how could i be tapping home
bent tracks to mend my windows,
how could tweed be fit to my length of limb?

ii. priestess

roses' appley scent, chenin blanc, johnny cash rumbling
at full volume. driving out for santa fe after work
because we'd get there in time for sunrise. the always out
always down scalp first of massage; a crisp shirt,
salad, morning; wrapped wrists, all the parts

you never got right—i conjure them to travel
nine hundred fiber optic miles, temper your lust
for jealousy. as for me: cat in a cage

doesn't even begin. *find yourself a boyfriend*
as if one can have some fattish, burly individual
lift down a suitable partner from a stack
of treated timber. as if one can't dance alone,

or with friends who are just friends, as if barefoot
says pregnant & not kung-fu, not toes reaching
between roots on the slow climb up a cutbank,

as if climbing were just for vines. dream: an abler ex
writes me on rumpled paper napkins, ballpoint letters
stained with coffee. he underlines so i can't mistake
his translation for rhythm on its own. shall i explain

the fact of order? the hands & how to stop them
from shaking. shall i cast about? every late call, your words
stumbling, & the trough, the beg from you, now far north.

i. magician

dream: i make you bend me over a bed, starchy
motel sheets meeting my palms & thighs:
i have to hide a massive cock hanging pendant
from my crotch, have to hunch forward

like i'm ill so you won't see it swing, thick
as your forearm & nearly as long. when i come

it's only tears & when i wake it's wind moving
through leaves that hang limp in delta fog.
takes a long time to get down from what i knew

into what i saw, with the river here curdling
through its land til both run brown as gravy & not
half as smooth. with the cheap vaults two blocks up
where a hundred days in, a body burns clean to ash

& can be blown like charcoal dust into a tin urn
or onto the tough southern grass. with the hours
while late turns to early & then over. years later, states away,

it's like old times. tweedling guitars upstairs, sleazy bass
& brass, smoke oozing into my room. the cheap music
of corn whiskey tumbling over ice & my teeth
clenched against the one sure thing:

you pounding away at a novel, *boning the muse,*
baby. rattling your own history into existence.

the space from polestar to dog star

it's pushing a boat out onto a lake,
then sitting down on the dock to watch it float
away. it's the water's surface, disturbed

then subsiding, & dark woody green
everywhere you can see into it. the dock pilings
soaking your jeans; the slick scum
so when you stand up, you have to walk

like an indian guide. it's pitching pennies
into a mall fountain. by small handfuls.
not the shiny ones, the old ones. the ones so tarnished

their odor prickles in your nostrils,
into the corners of your eyes; they wouldn't ring
if you tossed them onto pavement

& so into the water. it's heat shimmer. rippling
in front of a plywood flat slung across sawhorses

at an auction, its surface packed over
every inch with carnival glass: turquoise,
sunset orange, purple. blackberry purple.
eggplant skin, what they call aubergine
in the catalogs. it's the sheen

plated over each pressed curve
of tulip, cabbage, acanthus, every facet
of kite-shaped diamond. it's in the milk glass,

the dozens of hens on dozens of nests
from all the rooms in the farmhouse now brooded
all together. in how the rainbows
half-shift. as you walk around the bowed table. the grass

rucked up in clumps around its legs. it's only just
the baby blues, it'll pass. it's taking out basting thread
& how you snap it, leave red wisps in the chambray

because they'll come out in the wash. it's sliding
a sheaf of pages into a mailbox, the moment of grate

ringing in the skin just under your nails
as you shut the lid. it's a glint. in the bare spot

where the paint has rubbed away. it's coffee
in a paper cup. the sugar. in packets. it's the last time
you vacuum rooms in a house you're about to move out of.

“this way, if they came for the house
they’d have to leave something behind”

thirteen ways of looking at kudzu

i

in the last early light, a voodoo woman
shakes out her skirts on a porch
outlined in kudzu. she knows the names
of every weed, their tough or succulent leaves.

ii

green, green grows the kudzu
and the rain drips through it,
grey as paint.

iii

tell me which beauty to laud:
kudzu conquering gardens
or the sloppy wreath it winds around my wrist.

iv

half a nation washed out into the gulf.
the kudzu sunned itself in black soil.

v

kudzu crawls over trees,
thick as green caramel, if caramel
could crawl. scooby doo ghosts,
they lean over roads and booga-boo.

vi

i was comforted
like an abandoned mill wheel
anchored in kudzu's embrace.

vii

the poets smoke thin cigarettes
in the shade of kudzu clambered out
on a flagless flagpole,
dropped to the ground beside.

viii

o delta babes, wrapt in cotton,
dream of sweet peas or white daises,
not this kudzu with violence
in its blossoms to frighten
even the thirsty bees.

ix

at dusk, a woman involves herself in song
the way kudzu involves itself in the path
between beds of lavender and rue.

x

each kudzu vine writes in a new scrawl.
i shall never fully uncrypt them.

xi

anyone can weave a tent
from kudzu's ravelled strands.
anyone can map them into an atlas.
they cannot be baked into a pie.

xii

flat on a flat table, billwork bears curves
of kudzu writhing across a slant of daylight.
the shadows compare only
to the shadows of words.

xiii

storms gust through the cypresses.
kudzu season has returned.

sub tropic zone

an a.m. too early to bother with the clock, & waking
to another muted, vertical rain, to the plush sound
of truck tires on my wet street. to the slight twist
in my womb that announces another baby

i won't have to risk birthing. this fall should be snow
& north of here, it is. outside, trashmen sling up
can after can, saying little over the rain's cold sizzle,
& where weather toppled a rosebush forward, clear

red shoots pierce through among its leaves, their backs
a silver as untarnished as quartz sand. snow moon,
birch moon. pale & icy all year, even full, but most so
in december. this winter, i'm binding back my hunger

for ice, christmas lights, & air so cold you come in
with sore lungs & rimy eyes, & a pan of cider
to put heat back in your body. hands numb, wrapped
around the cup & soaked feet tucked near your hips

as snow fills the black lot at first like static
but then the world blunted under, the rumpled bowl
of the great plains stifled, grey like deadwood
beneath piles of frigid white velvet. small moon,

rabbit moon, snow moon. banana leaves tattered
& waving: easy. not hickory bark glazed by ice that cracks
around midmorning, that lays on asphalt perfect & dark
so cars skate, wed in brilliant crush; ice that flounces

windows with cabbage leaves or layered skirts, & the sun
turning it all brassy. steam, here. as it is always warm
i get the same rotting musk every month. restless
from red core to each fingertip, but this blood breaks off

with me. rabbit moon, birch moon, starve moon. rain
rolls off the street & below: sky shedding its own rich body
to the already-drenched earth. snow builds, silence & white
stitched by rusty fences. builds. small moon. snow moon.

the morning will be left clean & bright when it comes
& on the highway, tires will kick up mist that burns
white in the sunlight. i'll let it stream into my retinas,
believe despite myself that i've wandered into the season.

they are mountains they are hills

a two hundred mile hearthstone
forest blind as an alley but broad & deep
deep down mountainsides tracked
by snaking swerving roads by gold rush
dropouts by the childer of homesteaders
tricked into staking down these unarable acres

roads drawn across the hills as if by a razor
it's ragtime it's a rhythm i'm in need of a fix

down on this delta it's every breath wet clotted air
flat sodium-vapor-lit sky over flat swampland
never the two shall meet split by plantation
architecture & all its beloved bad memories

even midnight a close orange glow
stinking of cancer alley's poisonous profits
the stars' high chill lost in the drone
of piston axle scorch polish & drawl

every breath the greater emptiness
of my room the tin sound of walls
closed around moths & moths (wings abeat)
each dodge a lesson in ache

gossip here rattles like flags
set up in sunny rows flapping indolent
in the breeze of talk the doggy breeze
hunting its own ratty tail

i'll be glad to get back to stony soil
fields that stop where lumps of chert
choked off a tiller's gas-powered plan

& to see the bread-fed german faces ranged
across the earth's soft old shrug those broad
shoulders & barrelly bodies shaped
by planting fast between storms

by the plains & what produce got trekked
across them wrinkled bagged greasy
from wax mealy what should be firm
crisp what should give—peaches
were crisp as february when i was a kid

& oh the dry summer grasses the sumac
how one week in july would brittle the entire state
shroud every leaf the weeds rustling
(like paper) in palefaced dust
back when heat meant burn not boil

i have learned humility before bayou
& one-way the easy winter like no time at all
the hungry swamp who turns savage
our friendly skinks & carpenter ants

i want brambles wrapped back around me
twiggy embrace intended sparse
the caressable landscape that yields
to the camera more than to the palm

so many blooms lying & bold—the redbud
which is purple the jimsonweed with its friendly
silver trombones the touch-me-not (spurred
yellow orange shy at every edge of shade) clasps
easy to sooth its sisters' jealous burns

what i'd give for the rank friendship of ragweed
sunflower warmed walnut & oak & sycamore
so many pollens doseedoing through the air

with the whispering leathery musk of leaves
still brown & whole late in the hot part of every year
a scent that dizzies will spin you right off
the road & into valleys lounging in vines & mist

disappear you for all the decades
before some shoeless rifleman lifts off
the cocooning bindweed sloppy the honeysuckle
& after a whistle to his three hounds
drops that tangled tarp back over
the rust you're confined in

after dusk those dark hollows
cool so slow where granny witches' spit
mixes with runoff nitrous bitter
with the rust-touched sweat of the land

springs that trickle up from caves & weep
down through the dark litter of last fall's leaves
these ponds are oracles severe & sharp-tasting

let me kneel sober lady of fallow fields burnt black
of thunderheads that pile up like clay dug
to put in a mine a bridge a root cellar a storm cellar

let me bend down & drink
even the silt even the yellow
beer-breathed sun slanting through
even the muck of uncaught fish

i want sand & gravel scuffing all down
my shorts-bare shins into the tops of my feet
pressed into the fighting edge
of my radia blunted by muscle & skin
i want grit wetted & cold

& like a man but without risk do for me
the things i can't do take me seriously
fuck me tired & quiet shoulders heaving after
squint at me with your face hard & mean
you care whether i fly more like a moth or like a flag

mama hills let me stretch my body
out full in the hard deeps between
your creeper woven & your tearing-tender roots
give me real diamond-colored stars
in a big round sky black as night

beneath thunder, the prairie

i. honk for support

it's my sign, more than taurus ever was;
i carry it like a calf. weather is the kind of friend
who borrows your car to rob convenience stores:
he's got his august arms around me this week, fingers
tangled with the sweat in my hair. cintacorp
is the enemy. apathy is the enemy. silence is
the enemy. unfair to workers is the enemy.

they're my lines, more than they ever were
the local #216's. hair bakes, red-brittle & brassy
like tomato pressed into fine wire; de-vined. all
the footsteps here are mine, the migraine
& greenish haze, johnny-on-my-picket-walk.
sunstroke is the enemy. half a day's pay to pace
like tomorrow's coming in on waxed wings.

lone moth, lone june bug, mesh-battered,
vision-driven; i have seen better days
only in the lines on my palm. workers of the world
do not impede my view, clouds do not blunt
the shadows. still, i can't see an end to this strike.

scabs on my legs where i scratched out bites, burns
—even they have crossed the line.

ii. from the wagon

when the carnival left me in kansas city—
was slim-wristed, slim of thighs, hair a territorial red
that darkened from my life in the shade. resolute:
got my card for the local #216, got my flat.
my central air, my modern, my polyester shirts
& shoes that tied. cattle here are an axiom
of the landscape; so with hills that round like breasts,

bellies, fat with the fare of location. meat, here;
salt, here. axioms of the table. people of this place
root themselves, cannibals, rabbits alternately. round
of arm, bread-faced. gone to ground. i was the queen-to-be
of shuffled sawdust, of torchlight, of tossed change. now
i am settled—which is to say, full of regret. my place,
my rented cage. days that ache, working in murky heat,

nights slept through ice. municipal. our ratcatchers, our
three-legs: lived more like the living. our trained mules
would sneeze from dust & pollen, not landfill, bound
ankles, this dead-damp skyline. this is the end of grace
here where the carnival moved on—the end of light-as-air.

my skin paled to show freckles & i resigned myself
to inelegance. went to ground on the fourth floor.

iii. canticle for fiddle & drum

another, earlier body—my ankles, my castanets' clatter
would have arrested passers-by as this scribbled dispute
bleached nearly to match its pale ground, this fallow plea
can't hope. i miss the sunny, bouncing firelight
like birch tea. the bright shiver of piccolo, gritty boards
under my bare feet, & shuffle, & spin, leap, the flare
of scarf hem curling over my polished thighs: then dirt

kissed away in warm dark. the seasons ardent
& blessed, free-roaming, such dear libertines. stars
spread above swamp to swamp, pondside, hillside,
under a fatted moon, under a tin sheet propped up
under a ragged sky emptying itself of thunder & water,
the gentle cries, the hush, ebb. my barebacked balance,
my arms open like a valley: i fashioned a dance to the rhythm

of early blood. after all we are bodies first & bound
to words only when taught to speak. carillons rang
across my skin each time waves kissed battered tin,
pine paneling creaked & sighed, sheets crumpled
onto cast-off coats & skirts. what rare fortune to have laughed

nights away in radiant vertigo, when meteors
shot home, when spangles, coins—fell into place.

iv. thetis & vulcan in love

forearms blackened by grease & with shoulders
bigger than travel-tale mountains, bigger than prairie:
he lifted & slew me fine. through the dark dusks
of a few february nights i mapped him, us both hungry
for domain, salt-skinned, supple. even the unsanguine sun
pinked my cheeks, skin blissful under smudges
from his big steelhandlers' hands. he said *pretty*

like it was my name, breath a warm trill over
the moth's-wing-shaped shadows on my back—
& how i'd flex to his touch, my body one slow
toothy grin. slim of arm, of ankle, fine-waisted me
trilled up like a tune, flung out where pound & sway
marked a path for paired dancers. love was easy;
i had never yet grieved the morning for its indifference.

tambourine-bright, the ring fit cool as stolen horses
in the stable, cool as wonder—people drink champagne
for this feeling, the archer-boy's pretty poison, sparkly,
tarry, tipping every bud of every tree we kissed under,
sealing those winter nubs for one explosive quake of green

across brown. i could feel the red in my blood
singing hymenals, canny, clear to the ends of my fingers.

v. days gravid

st. joe's hospital was an easter lily's innards, too bright
in pale greens, in white, to clam the palms as it did. halls
echoing like empty houses, all these healthy
& sick silent as wallpaper; trees outside scarved
with scarlet by fall's first sure frost. big-bellied
me, two floors below my pink-&-ultrasound ground:
trauma ward. my hand in my little son's, his skin

like a salamander's, our stares puddled on the carpet
we were so quiet only the ghosts heard us speaking—
& there were ghosts. our old one-armed strongman,
soap sellers, mexicans still hauling crates, all meant
to pass through this town, wandered in want
of their boatman. son & i changed stories like tossing
a ball, easeful, talking our way out until a girl nurse

(i saw her thin body twisted around a trapeze, painted
bright with cheers) wheeled out my husband. the line took
his days, then his nights, then the arm he'd used to hold
up the cracked sky—weeks later the fever woke us up, shading
under our eyes & gravelly voices. one year, we'd have.

that brown river rolled east & we did not. “silver-footed,”
he said, “only dance & all shall be made well.”

vi. singer of tales

sheherazade had nothing on me. countless & one nights
on a carpet of magic plywood, wedged into the rattly top
of a rail trestle. grey autumn below where the dead
never walk, wary of the roads' relentless pulse,
how pale a place, how narrow-lipped, & we clung
steely, pared, like misplanted orchids. down & up,
tottery: crowdless old ropewalkers. each night

i leaned out to read from the constellation code:
ravna & the eagle, perseus, how baba yaga
lost her house, the legend of why things fall. fortune
cards spread. postcards. grandmother's ovid bound
in floppy cowhide. husband, already laid deep; son
fated to soar out of another, nattier sky on two wheels,
turning, then broken; lip-bitten daughter early & proud

in her billwork bridle. when her first tooth wobbled
like an apple & fell, i swore it would grow a dragon.
we were too thick to dine on air, bellies caving
& then our legs, wind chipping on our cheeks: two snows
before we curled into walls & a door. long ago we closed

the soft spots in our skulls & so learned to lie:
so high, we were still shut dumb of heaven's everyday.

vii. an emancipation

had a girl, a daughter, a clench, gifted
as an owl. stars pricked the sky through, the day
she was born, bright as pixies' knives.
she & her brother were barren children
of drought years, anti-passion, coined. he rode
off with his heart on a yamaha 750 one summer,
for the mountain-hid thunder, for queens in brass

belly chains, the way ice gnashes at pine needles.
the girl gave in to law & was auburn hair
& grey clothes thereafter. harbinger,
she is, atropos. her grandmother lived the dream
of peregrine, her gypsy skin, her irish blood
& love, her voodoo. kissing her left the taste
of tea leaves on my lips, the gift of flight; vines

wreathed her hands, ghosted, painted & starrish—
in this way she marked her resistance to the disease
of laid-out maps. she bequeathed me her charm,
india with its trunk up; it has found no home
in the pockets i've offered or in my vernacular grasp.

accidental photograph: my daughter's sclerotic hands,
constitutional. the avian in her has migrated for good.

medea

for Reetika Vazirani

she had to know he'd never
come home. when he kissed her
as though that day she had turned
unholy. did she set to her loom

anyway. did she. think how she had run
to him. dew falling to her skin & cool,
every door silent, the obedient
iron. lips set to purpose beneath henna,

cask of poisons at his call. did she
miss the sweet eastern oil already,
scenting the air where she'd served
hecate, did she ache in her belly

to run ritual. her hands pungent,
sticky, with rosemary & myrrh.
in her husband's sleeping breath
did she hear her sandals' hush echoing

through the dark halls. did she feel
the serpent's head heavy & the shape
of a folded packet of seed, resting
in her lap while she traced histories

out of his scales. her dragons
would mutiny, haul their chariot
back to helios' isle, they would scare his cattle
into the ocean. but would she ever

need them again. her body chapped
now by the greek sun. if going, ungently,
& what that means. did she remember,
did she. lost her only brother

for jason's sake. & did she even blink
at the blame. when she drew a knife
across her son's brown skin,
did she see the wake behind

like one man swimming a river. venom
hot in her throat. throat like linen,
forgotten on the shore, twisted
across stones & salted, rigid

after the tide. did she say,
we've spurned the gods, so even brilliance
like this day collapses on us. did she say, apology
is ours. did she. did she. did tears

rush off her face & did she see
the spreading edge of blood where they hit,
sob harder to see the red
curl in anyway, more wet

only an excuse to run farther.
& when the women called her
to come out front, could she speak
at all, or did she. just stare

at the tousled curves
of an ivy bed. the hard edges
of light laying there in rainwater,
sharper than the torch blazing above.

pastoral w/dirt under its fingernails

we have the best trees here, the best green
on earth. we raise suspicion in fields;
when it drains the soil we rotate it out
for broad crops of stubborn. this is hard land

to farm, angry land, indian land, overseen
by ghosts left behind to get at the white man
& his black work force; they're why tilled
acres burn so fierce here, why rain rolls

through every summer like a crime spree. memory
swims: fish in our ponds, pale green, silver,
red, dodges in & out of the cloudy shadows
beneath, their brownish green—the history

of never forgetting our place. i have always had
a soft spot for minnows & other creatures
bred for bait, worms that abandon the earth
when storms soak the mosses through, worms

that do their granddaddys' drought dances
in the gravel roads & pea gardens, plead
on the pavement in curvy text. boot heels sound
& slice them through, two split marks

to punctuate. & even the farmers, hands inked
with fertilizer, with earth drenched in a surfeit
of seed & row, with tractor oil—refuse their yelps,
the sudden straightening. the way pasture

trembles, shrinks a trace, to feel itself so solid
without benefit of annelids' craft. spring
is hard here, the sky fighting with the wind
& the uncertain sun. it's a world of waiting

for the trumpet vine & kudzu to reconquer
our roads. i want this poem to leave the taste
of the mud-salad ozarks in your mouth.
i want you to feel the mission in our voiceless soil.

Letters of Permission

Following are copies of letters granting me the right to use the poems in this collection which have been previously published. Published poems and the journals in which they appeared:

“going waterside” (as “frog as a metaphor for sex”) and “thirteen ways of looking at kudzu” in *Arkansas Review*, volume 34, number 3

“what the sun does to delicate skin” in *Chautauqua Literary Journal’s* inaugural issue, to be released this June

“on five (a poem in tarot)” with some alterations first appeared in *welcome to the ragball*, a limited-edition letterpress book on HammerPress, Kansas City, Missouri, 2001

“red*star” forthcoming in *Natural Bridge* number 11, to be released this July

Arkansas Review: A Journal of Delta Studies

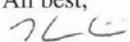
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10 January 2004

Victoria Brockmeier
555 Spanish Town Rd. #4
Baton Rouge, LA 70802

Ms. Brockmeier:

Arkansas Review gladly grants you the rights to republish the poems "frog as a metaphor for sex" and "Thirteen Ways of Looking at Kudzu."

All best,

Tom Williams
General Editor

CHAUTAUQUA

LITERARY JOURNAL

P.O. Box 613 • CHAUTAUQUA, NY 14722
A PUBLICATION OF THE WRITERS' CENTER AT CHAUTAUQUA, INC.
RICHARD FOERSTER, EDITOR • CLJEDITOR@AOL.COM

1.23.04

Dear Victoria Brockmeier,

I hereby release copyright to you
for your poem "what the sun does to delicate
skin" in accordance with your contract
with Chautauqua Literary Journal, dated
3.26.03.

Sincerely,
Richard Foerster

Date: 1/17/2004 5:00 PM -0800
From: Kathrin Goldman <goldfam@mindspring.com>
To: pixievix@earthlink.net
Copy:
Subject: right to use published work

dear victoria, just got off the phone with rush and he expressed your wish to use the piece published in "Welcome to the Rag Ball" by Hammerpress in K.C.. There is absolutely no problem with your using that particular piece in whatever way you wish. I did not assume it was to be used exclusively for the "Rag Ball" book. I wish you well in your new endeavors and thank you once again for your participation. as ever, Lester

Natural Bridge

A Journal of Contemporary Literature



January 14, 2004

RE: Accepted Work

Victoria Brockmeier
555 Spanish Town Rd
#4
Baton Rouge LA 70802

Dear Victoria Brockmeier,

This letter indicates that all rights for the following poems revert back to you upon publication of the work. These poems include:

"coonass maenad" (appeared in *Natural Bridge* no. 8, Fall 2002, page 150)

"red*star" (forthcoming in *Natural Bridge* no. 11, Spring 2004)

Thank you for your contribution to *Natural Bridge*.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Ryan Stone".

Ryan Stone
Editor
Natural Bridge

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Vita

Born in Denver, Colorado, Victoria Brockmeier moved away at eighteen months with her family and has lived in the central time zone ever since. From an early age she knew she wanted to be a cheerleader for the Dallas Cowboys; later, she knew she wanted to study paleontology, then archaeology, and finally astrophysics. In May of 2001, she graduated from Central Missouri State University with a Bachelor of Science in speech communications, just after her first two poems were accepted by *The Texas Review* and *New Letters*. Somehow, she landed in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, where she pursued a Master of Fine Arts in poetry at Louisiana State University, earned on defense of this thesis. She's fallen in love with the line break and isn't looking back.