

Beneath the Body's Disguise: Poems

by

Stephen Andrew Palermo

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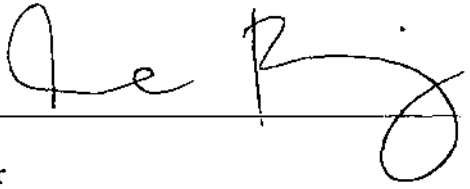
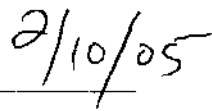
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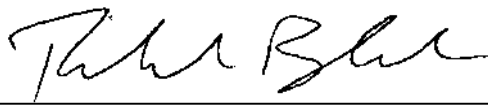
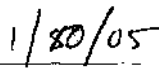
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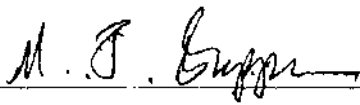
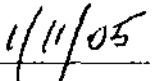
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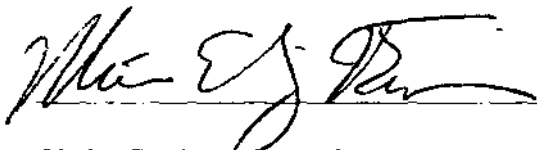
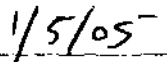
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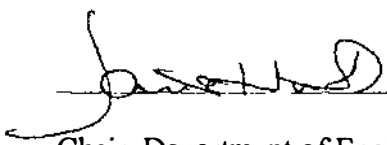
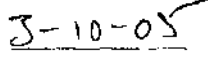
Reader

Reader

Chair, Graduate Committee

Chair, Department of English

Dedication and Acknowledgements

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of Timothy R. Bulmahn, 1978-2004.

Peace and love always brother.

I wish to ~~thank~~ the following people for their support in making this work possible: Mom, Dad, Natalie, Karla, James Thomas Stevens, David Lunde, Adrienne McCormick, Ralph Black, M.J.Iuppa, Anne Panning, David Schmidt, Christopher Chester, and Joanna McNaney.

I would also like to express my gratitude to all those people who have shared their stories with me along the way.

Grateful acknowledgements to the following publications, in which the following poems have previously appeared, both in earlier versions: Section 2 of “Film” in *In Our Own Words: A Generation Defining Itself, Volume Four*; and “Just After Winter” in *Cimarron Review*. “I Am a Substitute” is forthcoming in *the Dos Passos Review*; “Conjoined” is forthcoming in *Slipstream*.

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Introduction

In Galway Kinnell's collection of poems The Book of Nightmares, there is a line that uprooted every idea I held to be true about poetry. In section 1 of the poem "The Dead Shall Be Raised Incorruptible," a young soldier screams out to a commanding officer: "Lieutenant! / This corpse will not stop burning" (41).

The image of a burning corpse, incapable of being extinguished, got under my skin, where it remains today. Kinnell's soldier speaks to three major concerns in my work: death, physical violence, and hope. In contextualizing my work amongst the poets who have influenced and informed my voice, it would be impossible to begin without calling that definitive image to mind.

It is not a ground-breaking poetic strategy to employ the image of a body, whether alive or dead, especially when considering poets' almost instinctual impulse to explore the nature of mortality. I, too, am interested in the poetics of physicality, particularly how they relate to the manipulation of the human body—its limits, capabilities, and mysteries.

The corpse's refusal to stop burning is an image essential to aligning my poetry with that of my contemporaries. What Kinnell achieves is a translation of one of the basic tenets of Transcendentalism: he suffuses the image of burning not with the aesthetically pleasing image of flowers or grass, but with more flames. But what do more flames mean to the poem—to Kinnell's readers? I believe that the inextinguishable flame is an overarching metaphor for the work of poets everywhere. Even after a reader finishes a poem, something must continue on beyond its closing lines. All poetry must

close with energy—it must provoke deeper thought. Like a brilliant film or novel, a poem must also live on in the viewer/reader's mind after the closing credits or chapter.

As in “The Dead Shall Be Raised Incorruptible,” I too seek to unite moments of destruction and tragedy with hope—even if that hope is yet another phase of destruction. Using this notion in my poetry, I believe that whatever may come after the point of collapse ceases to be a stopping point—it is quite possibly unexplainable. It is in this space where I create, in order to give these moments their voice.

* * *

To articulate one's notion of craft is not a simple task. What I know to be true about my own process is in constant flux. In order to sustain the poetic craft, I constantly meditate on alternative modes of creation. Up until my senior year in college, I perceived poetry as a form of therapeutic release—an outlet for feelings of depression and anxiety. As I began to discover the work of several contemporary poets, such as Ai, Sharon Olds, Raymond Carver, David Mura, Rafael Campo, Adrienne Rich, Maxine Kumin, and Kim Addonizio, my perceptions began to change drastically.

Writing this introduction has shed new light on my poetry's possibility and scope. What is not superficially apparent is the process that lies beneath the poetic devices that allow meaning to transcend mere image. This thesis has forced me into a microscopic examination of my work and my personal life. One of the major goals of this critical introduction is to find my place as a poet in this world, at this particular time.

I am a firm believer that poets are both witnesses and storytellers. It is the work of the poet to relate his own intimate memories and experiences, while also articulating those narratives of people outside his own reality. In order to survive, poetry must find

readers who are searching for the mysteries of the human condition translated into the written word. As a poet, I need my readers to understand my words, so that they might hold onto them as their own.

My poems are narrative mappings of actual events from my own life, the lives that collide with my own, and my world. There are a handful of poems included in this collection that can be categorized as persona poems, which allow me to separate my history from that of my poem's narrative voice. This mode of creation affords me the opportunity to wear masks—to imagine experiences that have little or no autobiographical tie to my own life.

I am obviously not a young girl, but in the poem "Ascent," I attempt to understand the reality of the poem's narrator as genuinely as possible, free of my sex and/or gender constraints inhibiting the process. In my poetry, I borrow from the artifice of fiction to allow the freedom to release the personae desire and memory. The devices of fiction, i.e. scene, dialogue, and conflict, allow me to transform myself, while still occupying my own consciousness in the process.

* * *

I came to explore the wreck.
 The words are purposes.
 The words are maps.
 I came to see the damage that was done
 And the treasures that prevail. (Rich 102)

Historically, I have had a rough time in creative writing workshops. My poems are about sexual abuse, domestic discord, adoption, miscarriage, pornography, substance abuse, and accident. I didn't ask to be a problematic poet in the world of academia, but in my undergraduate creative workshops, I was. For the most part, my classmates

perceived my poetry to be cheap writing meant to upset and disgust. At that early stage, my work may have deserved such criticism. I was young, and as a result, my poetry followed suite.

I am guilty of writing poems that can cause a certain amount of reader resistance and/or uneasiness. However, I do not choose subject matter based on the assumption that it will disturb a reader, nor do I write poetry that I believe will set my reader at ease. Either one of these creative impulses is limited in vision and demonstrates nothing but an immaturity of craft and integrity. I refuse to operate at the level of “shock for shock’s sake.”

Not all criticism of my poetry has been negative. As time passed, the work became stronger and my intentions could be seen more clearly. The subject matter remained in a similar place, but there was substantially more weight to each piece. I think my earlier classmates’ uneasiness may have arisen from the false assumption that the truth of poetry is also a biographical truth possessed by its creator. Within the context of the poetry collected within, this can be either true or false. While only a small portion of the poems collected within this thesis are persona poems, it is important to examine the nature of persona poems more closely.

An excellent example of a persona poem is Ai’s “Abortion,” from her collection Vice: New and Selected Poems. One of her shortest poems, it is a narrative of a man returning home to find his lover in bed, after having an abortion: “You’ve done it, as you warned me you would / and left the fetus wrapped in wax paper / for me to look at. My son” (4). I have never read a single poetic line that laid bare such a graphic and intimate situation as the one “Abortion” is built around. This poem demonstrates the

transformative power of the persona poem—a female becomes a male who describes a terrifying situation. Ai allows herself to shift from who she is in reality to who she wants to become in the space of her poem. Through the use of the poem’s persona, I am also capable of exploring new terrain and experience.

Ai is capable of creating far-reaching narratives in relatively small physical spaces; “Abortion” is a ten-line, single stanza poem. The success of this poem, with its limited amount of space, requires an intense amount of precision. Aside from informing my poetry on a thematic level, Ai’s work has made me conscious of spatial economy: the fine art of choosing only the most necessary, powerful elements that allow precise readings, not ones fraught with misunderstanding. Almost immediately after exposure to Ai’s work, I began to understand how integral the harmony of structure and substance is to a poem’s success.

* * *

Driving out of town, I see him crossing
the Brooks Pharmacy parking lot, and remember
how he would drop to his knees in the kitchen
and press his face to my dress, his cheek flat against
my belly as if he were listening for something. (Howe 70)

Human sexuality has compelled poets to write on subjects ranging from true love, to heartbreak, to sexual violence since poetry has existed. I have always been fascinated with reading and writing poetry centered around issues of sexuality, with emphasis on pornography and sexual abuse. These two subjects allow me to meditate on the idea of bodily harm, to “explore the wreck” (102) Rich writes of so eloquently, so that I might find something greater than utter destruction littering the landscape.

David Mura is another poet who operates in a similar framework as me, particularly with regards to subject. Before discovering Mura's 1995 collection The Colors of Desire, I was compelled to write about the subject of pornography, but had experienced several false starts. In "Notes on Pornography Abandoned," he writes:

As the woman on the screen shouted, coming
again and again, pounding the bed, her face
twisted like an astronaut pulled by G's,
I felt this rush, this fix at the center.
And found myself kneeling, unable to stop (13)

In the poems collected in this thesis, it is obvious that pornography plays a role in my poetry. Pornography, while remaining one of the most controversial of all forms of expression, has informed my sense of tone. The uninhibited manner in which pornography depicts sexual acts has pushed me to treat the subject of pornography in a similar fashion—poetically. This creative move can be seen most clearly in poems such as "Factory" and "Because I Need to Get Off," though a similar approach appears throughout much of my work.

My poetic approach is a simple one: I describe scenes of exploration, sexuality, and violence as they appear before my eyes. I do not dumb down my poetic language, but it does possess a necessary simplicity. If I want something deeper to rise above the poem's central images, then each poem must be free of roadblocks. I am not a poet who wants to pull the proverbial wool over any of my reader's eyes. I want the poem "Accident, 08.23.01" to be about more than a motorcycle accident I witnessed firsthand. I want my readers to know exactly what is unfolding in the course of the poem, and relate that to their own lives. I lay out what is essential to the poem, and invite my readers to pull something away from its surface, or whatever may not be superficially attainable.

When crafting each poem, I consider the possibility of my reader's repulsion or attraction to certain images or language. Exposure to pornographic film at an early age forced me to view life experiences in a slightly different light than some of my peers. Graphic imagery, both violent and sexual, continues to surface in my work. I cannot escape my attraction to subjects of this nature.

This being said, there are moments of joy in many of these poems. The fact that I describe three separate instances of sexual abuse in "Shrift" must be weighed against the fact that I am retelling three individual women's stories. The act of sharing memories with me, as described in the poem, is one of joy. It speaks to the trust all three women placed in me when offering their darkest secrets. Had these women shared run-of-the-mill childhood memories, such as going to an amusement park or joining an athletic team, I would have never written "Shrift." Because of the very graphic and definitive nature of their experiences with sexual abuse, I was compelled to write this poem. This is one of the joys of being a poet. I am able to share unsettling aspects of the human experience through the poem, while also sharing the gift of trust with those people who inspire me along the way. While this relationship of trust comes into play when writing biographical poems, I feel a similar sense of satisfaction when imagining voice and place.

While "Because I Need to Get Off" casts a darkly comedic shadow on the similar, yet more dismal poem "Factory," it still remains a poem about addiction. There is no place for unrealistically happy poetry in my body of work. These emotions do not describe who I am as a person, and they certainly do not find a home in my present creative endeavors.

Poetic language can soften the brutality of experiences—after all, it is an artistic reshaping of actual events. When I create poetry, I keep this certainty in the forefront at all times. In order to allow my poetic language to genuinely recreate that which has become memory alone, it must possess as much power as possible. The strength of poetic language is what ultimately allows my readers to consider a new vision of the familiar.

In this thesis, there are two poems titled “Accident,” each preceded by different dates—one being a trauma involving myself, the other a fatality I witnessed second-hand. It took me over a decade to be able to put “Accident, 09.27.90” onto paper without turning my world upside down. I have found that the single hardest part of the creative process is the unearthing of memories of which I cannot free myself.

Basing poetry on traumatic experiences from my own life is almost unbearable, even though it proves to be extremely satisfying when something genuine surfaces from the debris. That this step of the process can prove so genuinely disturbing only affirms the necessity of its place in my poetry.

I have never felt poetry should come easily. Without personal conflicts with subject, my poetry would cease to be craft, existing only as a rehashing of experience into small boxes of text. The writing must hurt, if only a little, if it is to serve itself and its reader truthfully. Pornography, accident, abuse, and alcoholism are all subjects I am drawn to, for their tendency to provoke ideas and images some people may want to stray from. These themes, whether I employ them in autobiographical works or persona poems, are all issues I have dealt with, or continue to deal with in my life.

Sharon Olds remains one of the most influential contemporary poets on my work. Like her poetry, I consider mine to be confessional in nature. While that coinage has traditionally been seen as ugly, “confessional” makes sense when trying to express what a poet like Olds is accomplishing. Like my own, her poems contain a certain amount of confession. Whether I am operating from the autobiographical “I,” in a poem like “Film,” or relating a narrative told to me secondhand, as evident in “Shrift,” confession is yet another element of my work as a witnessing poet. Olds writes in “the Guild:”

that son who would come to be in his turn
better at it than his teacher, the apprentice
who would pass his master in cruelty and oblivion,
drinking steadily by the flames in the blackness,
that young man my father. (17)

This passage captures beautifully what I want to achieve in my poetry. The poems included in this thesis that are centered around patterns of psychological violence, such as “Carousel” “Shrift,” and “Because I Need to Get Off,” all strive to attain a vision similar to Olds.

* * *

Fearing fracture, never again to trust myself,
sentenced to hear the cry of all things broken.

-James Thomas Stevens, “The Ritual of Condolence”

Critical reception of my work comes into play when I am working on a poem. To be quite honest, I think it’s foolish for a poet to insist that he or she “writes only for him or herself.” If I am to affect emotion in my reader, then I must recognize that my craft is also an open dialogue between my poem and my reader.

If my reader is upset with one of my poems, I want them to be upset with themselves—not me. I pay particular attention to the way I craft scene and image. I have to; it's my job.

In “Dress Up,” a young boy wears his mother’s clothing, engaging in an active incestuous relationship, and later, sexual fantasy involving the same woman. “Her areolas / are small pancakes” is important to the poem because of what it accomplishes. It is not merely a description of the mother’s areola—it operates twofold.

The poem’s persona is only capable of comparing an exposed female breast to something from his reality, an object as common as food. The image is one which we can all distinctly call to mind, but its context takes precedence over its universality. In order for this image to work in the poem, my reader must temper it against the fact that it is being used in conjunction with a relationship of sexual submission and violence.

I don’t want my reader’s single reaction to be disgust with the poem’s pervasive sexual abuse. I want my reader to find the abuse upsetting, while also feeling slightly aroused by the mother’s exposed body, or comforted by the “smell of bath on her neck.” I use sexually loaded language to provoke an emotional response to a situation most people don’t typically perceive as sexually stimulating: incest. Incest is not acceptable, but forcing people to filter it through a different consciousness is, and it is the mark of success in my poetry.

In the poem “Planning Ahead,” a young girl has a dream about a classmate the same night her father molests her. It is the poem’s use of the common teenage notion of romance, the boy’s chivalrous spreading of a frog’s skin, so tightly enmeshed with the image of her father entering her that causes the reader’s conflict—hopefully. These two

faces of sexuality, attraction and domination, run head first into one another, and cause a collision of emotional responses. I want my readers to meditate on their conflicting responses. I create conflict so that my readers might confront pieces of their own selves inside the context of the poem's jarring juxtapositions. I want my readers to question why they are capable of feeling ways they don't want to.

As a poet, I have felt what some might label a "calling" to the subject matter I explore. James Thomas Stevens summarizes how I've felt throughout my journey as a poet. I do feel "sentenced to hear the cry of all things broken" (99). I want to reveal the subtleties that reside in the spaces before and after the moment of their breaking apart.

* * *

I want my poem's meaning to linger at the divide between decision and accident, the moments that force us to realize we never truly have a grasp on the course of our lives. These are the moments when we understand life more genuinely.

In the wake of tragedy, we are stripped of all pretension, left with nothing but instinct and raw emotion to traverse the detritus. My poetry resides in that moment. It is here I am most fascinated—more apt to understand myself and the human experience.

As a poet, I want to continue to chronicle the falling apart of assumption and hope, of permanence and certainty. I want to uncover the spaces where we are all shocked to find something we never knew to be hiding beneath the surface.

Collision

ACCIDENT, 09.27.90

Thirteen years later,
it plays out like this:
multi-color jungle gym,
neighborhood boy
swinging from orange ladder to lawn,
recoil of branch realigns
symmetry
of left and right eye,
cheeks run over with syrup
spit from a tear in soggy fruit
before a blackness drops—
not quite a veil, not quite
a rubber wall of canine longing
and EMT shears freed from Velcro,
not quite the dampness of washcloth
dabbing at an orbit
flooding over with insides.

After the initial MRI,
I retire my iris and lens
to burnt grass and dog shit
to remember only this:

belted to a gurney
in the belly of an ambulance,
eyes and ears mummified,
the slowed sound of my father's
reassurance cooed through
painkillers and prayers,
I begin to take notes.

i

FILM

1.

For my third birthday I beg
for cowboy guns. The day arrives,
Mom's planning cast aside,
icing caked to hands at home
when hitched to Underoos—
I am a cowboy, wetting the bed,
inclined to kill, a drive to roll
Indians down cellar steps
once I've dealt them their justice.

2.

My father dodges seeing *Platoon*
in the theater—it's too much. He prefers our
family room, before church. We pace
between bathroom and closets, necks craned
for the sound of towns tearing apart—
staccato of rifle-blasts and one-legged
dances, preparing me for communion.
The jungle's simple green grin opens for
a fatigued body slipping to the floor,

mosquitoes like fists crash land on necks.

I'm unsure what I feel. The rental box reads:

the first casualty of war is innocence—a swelling
in my stomach and thighs when *fucks* get tossed
back and forth fluid as sniper flies, buzzing into
night, searching for a thud—the muted cry of
a target absent from a hand grenade hot potato
game we all run from eventually.

3.

Years later, I am curled up on a living
room floor, anxious for the split
of a skull execution
style, baseball bat across brow,
wound slipping back inside itself.

4.

When Rodney King becomes
the piñata poster child for an abuse of
power so ancient it takes an electronics
revolution for a nation to accept
the horror—every channel: the same

black body rolled into asphalt,
a yo-yo drawn back with batons:
one more injustice, one more
ugliness written into
history on Kodak reel—grainy
film crying for a close up.

DISMANTLE

Because he's an EMT,
I think my cousin sees too much,
Maybe more than his eyes care
to commit to memory—
like the sixteen year old girl
shot by her boyfriend
with a sawed off shotgun
at close range in her mother's kitchen.

When the ambulance arrived,
they found her alone,
backed against an oven,
half conscious and unaware of what
happened, her arm lying close by
in a mess of blood and chipped bone.

Maybe the girl mumbled
mommy or help or don't, but
I will never know because
my cousin doesn't say. All I have
is what I gather while sitting

with him at a kitchen table, listening
to stories of piecing people back
together at the moment of dismantle.

I wanted to ask him what she looked like:
hair color, eyes, what a bullet wound looks like
from that close, but I can't escape what I create
as memory from his retelling: the girl raises
an arm to defend herself from buckshot,
body driven onto the floor in front
of the stove where she made breakfast
that morning, before he found a phone number
on her night stand, before he went home
for his father's shotgun and shells, before she was
laid out for my cousin to find: torn apart
at the shoulder, the smell of burnt flesh
and discharge fresh in her nose—not quite knowing
when someone would come for her.

HE PROMISES

to gut her like a fish if
she leaves with the baby.
It'll be worth the twenty five years
to watch her eyes roll over themselves
like wet stones. Shoving her against a wall,
he fixes an elbow in the throat
where their daughter listens
for her mother's heart. Baby screams
for a clean diaper or Dada
or Mama or milk.
Eyeing the butcher block,
she pictures herself nuzzling up
to this man that night while he dreams
of an endless bottle or breaking a cherry
on his parents pull-out or the decade in county.
She'll push a steak knife into
the meat between the ribs,
liking the feel of flannel wetting itself
between her knees, laughing at him
thrashing around the bed,
a trapped fish searching for

a saving breath. The knife
disappears up to its handle
until he comes to, covering the cut
with a free hand, calling her a cunt,
pitching his fists into the dark, searching
for a plane of skin open to bone.
Taking her from behind, he sends
a set of knuckles into the small of her back,
jerking back on the crucifix
strung above her breasts.

Baby screams from her
high chair, defenseless—
tiny pink palms
driven into cheeks,
blood vessels split
into streams around her eyes.

OPENING DAY

He pushes past
his daughter
on the way upstairs,
handgun bouncing
against his hip.

She's already seen this
in a daydream:
the missing gun
she didn't tell Mom about,
the secret she kept
just for him, praying
that the last stay would
be it for him
in the psych wing.

Feathered dynamite
kicks him against
a quilt she made
for Father's Day—
softened shriek

of I love you
from the attic.

A young girl stops
beneath the window,
listening for
the end of the world.
She leaves
her tricycle behind—
streamers grabbing
at the sun.

CONJOINED

The newspaper tells a story
of a Minnesota boy who is admitted
to emergency for indigestion
which the doctors determine
to be a tumor buried just below his liver.

After some poking, prodding,
and a battery of tests, the tumor is
found to be what was left of
the boy's conjoined twin.

Apparently, the boy ate his brother
in utero. No one knows how
much of the boy's still forming frame
was digested in order
to set the growth into motion.

This is an unsettling evolution ,
this transformation from twin to tumor.
Did one boy see something in his brother
that sparked some pre-natal jealousy,
the first to part lips, the first to shift

against mommy's stomach hard enough
for the world to feel the trembling with two fingers?
Was this upstaging enough for the weaker
of the two to take to fratricide?

With the tumor's removal, the boy is
restored to working order, no more
indigestion, no more upset insides.
The family is sent home wondering how
to explain the boy's life before the waking world.
Without cognition, without fully formed
finger or teeth, the boy caught a glimpse of a failed
future, and took matters into his own tiny hands
before crawling into the light.

COLUMN

You pass through the Holocaust
memorial in Boston—
each of the six glass columns
lined up and laid into earth symbolize
a single camp; Dachau and Bergen-Belsen
are transparencies confused with climbing.
strings of numbers—each line an eye,
mouth, heart. You become dizzy
with their height, the permanence
of glass, the accusing arches of zeroes
and ones, this mass of design and destruction
recalling only film titles and history lessons—
a diary unearthed from an annex,
a Spielberg soldier picking prisoners off
from a bedroom balcony before tea time—
the grain of sliver bulldozers dropping
a tangle of bodies into a shallow ravine,
mouths no more than holes broken into the face.

ACCIDENT, 08.23.01

The dying man's lover
screams into his twisted
body and bike—still
attached at the hip,
bent between gears.

We don't witness the union
of cheek and chipped stone.
We arrive after ambulance
and police car,
before gurney belt
and yellow tape.

We are given just
enough time to balance
shock and relief
before he dies, broken apart
below a streetlamp,
blood escaping onto asphalt
as fast as his heart will allow.

Certainty

CAROUSEL
(after Raymond Carver)

I'm being driven from the squeal
of downtown parking garage to suburban
street slick with leftover storm,
the hum of tire on raised tar,
Public Enemy CD a dull thump
of throat and drum rumbling in the trunk.
When you're this drunk,
nodding off in the passenger seat,
pay particular attention
to the Earth standing still,
even when your body is being dragged
along without say at sixty miles an hour,
your world is fixed in a soldier's salute,
bearing witness to the rise and fall
of the carousel you ride,
your stomach turning, thoughts forgetting
themselves as quickly as they come.
Open your hands for the golden ring
strung on a branch somewhere
along the roadside. Beg for
one more ride on someone else.

INFIDEL

The drink was my lover:
loyal, affectionate, effective.
I'd fill a rock-glass
with bits of ice,
a wedge of lime,
two fingers worth of Sapphire
and a splash of tonic.

In turn, she rubbed my back,
the downslope of my throat,
the inside of my stomach—
halting the traffic
of every waking thought.

I was the first to pull away.

I'd clean out the fridge,
vacuum the rugs,
and rearrange my bedroom
night after night to forget
her, passing through my lips,

over my tongue, creeping
into the center of what
she alone could blur.

I took her back.

She didn't have to beg.
Her eyes were enough to persuade.
We went slow at first,
finding our rhythm once again,
five, six times a night to start with
before we both began to stumble.

She was there
to bring me to my feet,
to warm every last inch of my body,
to whisper to me
I don't ever want to catch you
looking at another woman again.

FOUR SENRYUS

Ten years old—first kiss:

juniper of stolen gin.

In light I know love.

Collision of night,

glass gathers like root—single

heart bottled and bound.

At the bar: instinct

to own eye and tongue, hunting

retreat in skin fold.

Three a.m.: engine

hum and ash—an escape passed

from finger to mouth.

CERTAINTY

1

On her way home
split open between
a sweet sixteen surprise
and a bridge embankment—
jaws of life peel back
a two ton Halloween costume.

2

Plunging in and out
of a cavity, sweat built
with the change of position—
a moment when
meanings are assigned
to the collision of the unsound.

UNTITLED FOR TIM BULMAHN

There is no swell of wind
and reed and brass
to score the final breath—
just what the body can't hold
any longer, drained out
and coughed up onto dashboard
and bathroom floor,
the thinned bottom
of wrist opening itself
like zipper to bone,
the stutter of warm water
and emptying vein,
no hush of wind
no meeting of air and thistle
only the rocking of unsteady
feet, kicking four legs free—
only loss of balance:
the waiting for the weight
hanging overhead
to steady itself.

PLANNING AHEAD

After lights out, bedroom door
cracked like a treasure chest fault-line,
you stumble for sobriety with your palm—
above me, burn of whiskey and yeast;
vice of stomach clenching hips,
each breath a baby step toward walking.
The first night, you press your thumb
inside, jerking me from a dream
about my lab partner in biology.
He was cute, spreading a frog open
with a surgeon's hands, opening the skin
to a tiny gray heart.
You don't think to warn me
that fingers grow into fists. Snapping
under chewed nails, I am a wish-
bone drying in a slow puddle of blood and juice.
My wish doesn't come true.
The splintered half
you took from our post-meal game
had more meat than mine.
It happens over and over—

sleep refusing to come until
you do, with a struggle. You remind me,
I am used, you have to try harder.
Your brother takes me to the zoo,
burying my mouth alive in his lap,
moments later we watch
tigers eat lunch—monstrous
jaws draw back, exposing
a double rainbow of reds, pinks, and grays,
just before yawning themselves back
to sleep with half-empty stomachs.

ASCENT

1.

Kitchen, Super Bowl

Sunday, weight against back,

whisper trust, secret,

later, water lingers

on faucet, waiting for right

moment, knuckles

below sweatshirt, sour

cream and beer on neck,

screams for touchdown

from living room.

2.

I need his breathing—an engine

running on empty,

getting it all in before

Mom's back

from bingo.

Outside of this, I am not

alive: arms asleep

behind head, bound with bungee

chords, hair tie rolling
hooks into forearms—
each thrust testing the skin's
patience. I'm sure it will break.
The rope reminds me
I am made of blood.

3.

Atop a basement bar,
he uses a souvenir from a cruise.
Brushing it across my mouth,
leaving flecks of whip
in cracks of lip like pepper.
Packaging tape over my thighs,
I can't move to meet Mom's
eyes when she finds us.
We all stop. He doesn't
look upstairs, to the landing
between the laundry room
and where we have begun
to listen for ascending footsteps.

FACTORY

1.

The screen opens on a threesome

thrown across a couch,

an almost instant rotation of cock

from mouth to fist. The girl

is barely eighteen, willing

to be split open on video

with middle finger and tongue tip.

One man pushes inside her asshole,

the other kneels in front of her,

pulling her hair behind an ear,

showing the camera every inch

of the mouth he fucks, all three

of their uncovered parts understanding

only mechanics and momentum.

2.

I don't realize the relief

until a year later,

when sprawling out

on a bathroom floor I fuck

neighbors and teachers in private,
replaying a string of images
from that first film,
the moment when fascination
became necessity.

3.

In order to write this poem
a decade later, I have to flesh out
what is definitive about that first film,
that first forgetting what
my mother taught me about women,
about sex—four stories
above Blockbuster video and Pizza hut,
where business went on as usual, I studied
the fundamentals of fucking, completely missing
the road-signs erected between asshole and thigh:
my sex life would be orchestrated,
conducted and mass produced,
a sure shot ensemble of men and women
feeling the climb of a similar crescendo.

And then I remember the morning after,

just before dawn, a whistle blowing in the center
of town, calling the workers back to another shift
upright against a belt, inspecting for error—
for even the smallest hint of mistake
escaping the machine's attention.

BECAUSE I NEED TO GET OFF

I'm at the porn store,
flipping through cover after cover
of cavernous asshole
and beaded strings of semen
clinging to the edges of face,
overblown breasts and cum shots
no one bothers to airbrush.

I return to the rawness
of this world: the strict avoidance
of speech, the ease of entry,
the aversion of a girl's eyes
from a lens recording the next step
in forgetting herself.

Back home, videos line the inside
of a dresser drawer; a personal den
of depravity barely enough
to bring me to orgasm.

After their time, they are left
to stand alone, unused,

certain they've been replaced.

Once again, I've surrounded myself
with millions of minutes
of insertion and implant,
discount bins and binding equipment—
surrounded by men and women
like myself who need to watch
what they will almost never bear
calling their own.

A BESTIARY OF PORN FILMS

Barely Legal

The cover promises Lolitas:
 schoolgirls begging
 to be taught how to fuck,
 but the video's more of the same,
 women past thirty deflowered
 on film for the fifteenth or sixteenth time.

S&M

Ribs poured into rubber,
 black apple mouth gag binding voice,
 belt buckle and hairbrush prints
 fading on lower backs—
 climax is contingent
 on a fleeting possession.

Gangbang

The present record
 is just over 600 men
 in a single sitting—Olympic
 decathlon of filled holes and facials,

insides packed with ice
to numb the thrusts.

Male

The plot is simple, the smallest
of the bunch goes for a weekend fishing
trip with the higher-ups from the office
and ends up their servant, moving from lap to lap,
swallowing each man whole—their catch
much larger than anticipated.

Bukkake

On her knees,
a single girl opens her mouth
for what looks like over
five dozen men, all slowly
pulling on themselves,
praying they come last.

Beneath the Body's Disguise

SEDUCTION

We are seven and four,
rifling through a bedroom
closet, when he asks
me to have sex with him.
I laugh at the prospect of
putting my pee-pee in his
butt out of instinct alone,
not considering what it
would involve: getting hard,
unlatching my overalls,
lowering his face into hand-sewn afghans,
plus, I was not up for the task
of pushing inside a tightness
just cleared of diaper rash.
I told him no, the rudiments
of fucking having escaped me
at the moment, not stopping to wonder
who taught a kindergartner to invite
sodomy upon himself.

A decade later,

he is a babysitter

crutching a bedroom door

with a folding chair.

There are screams

for an older brother to help,

to open the door.

The babysitter

yells for them to be left

alone—they are just

playing around.

NIGGER LOVER

I'm the least racist person I know. I'm not sure why

I'm scratching the words *nigger lover* into my classmate's locker.

She has a picture of her and a black kid hanging

up in it. They're hugging. He gets to feel her tits

and I don't. I bet he pretends they're basket-balls.

Our psychology teacher tells the class that

a student returned from gym to find an epithet

waiting like a chicken scratched reminder of

her willingness to keep her options open.

When she tries to hide the fact she is the victim

in question a tear falls onto her desk.

I act just as shocked as the rest of the class.

\$10 BET

Once, in the tenth grade,
I bet one of my friends
ten dollars I'd be
going out with the girl I'd had
my eye on by the end of the year.

Two years later,
she married the cop
she was seeing
in high school,
and got pregnant.

One day,
she locked herself
and unborn child in the bathroom
and put her husband's
handgun between her lips.

Never won that bet.

SHRIFT

1.

She tells me when we're naked,
 lying in a motel bed kicked free of its covers:
 her sister's wedding ends with an unpaid
 photographer sobering up by splitting
 the bridge of her mother's nose,
 a boyfriend laughs when she slips from his waist
 onto the floor, leaving her in a corner,
 opened, humiliated, to take in the story
 she whispers to me, thighs damp
 between my own, begin to unfold.

2.

Soon after the honeymoon, the step-father substitutes
 her for her mother, reassuring her all hell will break
 loose if she doesn't open her hand or mouth. The trial is set
 for Christmas break. I wonder what present
 I'll unwrap when she is preparing to take the stand
 in her own defense, testifying to an audience
 hand-picked to calculate her credibility: number
 of partners and drinks, bra color and birthmarks,

an explanation on the decade it takes to speak up.

All of this while I anticipate watching
my grandfather descend a staircase
loosely disguised as Santa.

3.

A month into the job, she's convinced
that watching the kids is not enough.

The children, well on their way to growing
wings, don't hear the couch springs recoil from
their father and Wendy's weight.

Years later, she'll say she became a woman by default—
milk bottle heating in saucepan,
jeans tossed into the gut of a stroller,
the clench of jaw-line and eyelid
when her throat is held in his hands.
She thinks a happy thought before taking flight.

WE HUDDLED AROUND IT

The ten of us, half-expecting
a countdown to the point
of explosion, the bomb ticking
somewhere in her tiny belly
or loose fat of leg or forearm.

Our own memories won't allow
us these details, our starting
points in these bodies,
in this world.

Rightfully so, we were unready
at fifteen to watch one of our own
tend to her child as if
out of second nature,
lifting her shirt to feed her
in front of us without fear,
or shame.

I pictured myself crushing her
still forming skull, the shifting plates

of bone not wholly stitched together
beneath the skin, popping apart
like shale under my weight.

Everyone took their turn,
forming words that held
no meaning; they were functional
in their slurring, offering only hope
of laughter, speaking in tongues
they never knew to be fully formed.

I wanted to hold her, but couldn't
erase the image of cradling
her against my chest,
the sound of her screams
becoming smaller
as they ran short of air.

I AM A SUBSTITUTE

teacher in

a Friday afternoon

art room when I notice

the boy's left hand,

fingers clipped off

just below the knuckle,

leaving a mess to eyes trained

for detail. His hand understands

healing, the throb of want, the longing

for missed parts. The students

at his table look without questions.

He knows they wonder how,

but almost never why.

The boy moves his arm

over the table

on invisible bearings—

illustrating how easily we can

draw a circle without ever lifting

our fingers from the page.

YOU KNOW WHO KILLED ME

In the parking lot
of the Association for the Blind
and Visually Impaired thrift shop,
taped to the inside of a minivan's
passenger window, I recognize her
face, 14, maybe 15, white, blond hair slick
against her forehead, coke bottle glasses
magnifying her tired eyes,
YOU KNOW WHO KILLED ME!
above vital statistics and school
picture. She's the story of the summer until
the morning she's packed in vinyl and
hailed out of the woods near an apartment
complex where the black men live who are questioned
according to the testimony of village kids
who said she hung out with older boys from the city.

I go inside, hoping to find some good
jazz on vinyl, Trane, Mingus, Monk,
but leave furious when all I find
is Jerry Vale and Lawrence Welk.

DRESS UP

1.

She slips bracelets
over my loosened wrists
and laughs at a joke
I can't hear. In her vanity,
there are three of me
crossing the room,
swinging my head like
she does when guests come over,
pushing up against my chest
to show my boobs off.

Her areolas are small
pancakes with sprouts of hair
that lick my tongue
like cactus. She moves
a palm into the tangle
of hair covering her privates.

I want to stay there all
day—pushing a single finger

into her soft belly,
the smell of bath on her neck,
rubbing each fingertip over mine
like sandpaper and pearl.

2.

She puts the barrel
in her mouth,
butt propped against shoe sole
for traction, big toe jammed
against trigger.

During lunch, I miss her
goodbye : monochrome rainbow
of ignited insides bent
between bed-post
and daddy's nightstand—
Old Spice
rocking in its aftermath.

TROLLEY

1.

The first three drinks quiet
thumb twirling and napkin
tearing, the next
three hear words alien to
tongues finding rhythm
nestled against gum-lines
and the undersides of an erection.

2.

He is strange to her,
disappointment piercing
bedroom dark, curve of face
chipped into phantoms,
teeth on earlobe, bend of fingers
slipped between lips
the single link to
a skeleton's face.

3.

She leans over

in bed, swallows ice
 slid against gin, rolls rock glass
 along stomach and nipple like
 a child's blanket she can't bring
 herself to wash.

4.

Shit clumped up
 on carpet, fingerprints smeared on
 door handle and left cheek
 she sucks two fingers
 into dried fruit.

He rises from a dream to find
 her, lights on, window sucking dawn into
 a sleeping mouth, yawn of a trolley
 crawling through rain—
 a faucet leaking onto satin.

FIDELITY

1.

The husband and wife are finishing
their dinners at the table furthest
from the entrance, plates piled with
shredded napkins and wrung out limes.
A door opens, the outside bending
around a woman apologizing to her cell phone
for forgetting to pick up the stained dress shirt
from the cleaners. The husband recognizes
what his wife would call a stranger.

2.

The man goes to the fetish ball
because the girl he is trying to fuck
is into S&M, and upon her urging him
to expand his horizons he agrees to meet
her there. Men are blindfolded, ballgags belted
to their mouths; he considers leaving,
but pictures Monday at work, the boys
cutting into him for not closing the deal
with the girl from accounting.

He knows if he leaves, she'll find a man
who won't mind asking
for her body from his knees.

He stays and drinks gin with the girl
and the man she brings along. The three
of them go to her apartment,
vodka is poured down the front of pants,
Prokofiev swelling in the living room
and they dance naked, hands locked.

The man forgets where
he is, what brought him here.

The woman and her friend push
him against a wall and take him
in their mouths. A palm plays
at his Adam's apple, nails leave crescents
on his lower lip. When he comes,
he immediately misses the tightness
over his neck, the stubble biting
at the soft of his thigh.

3.

When he makes love

to his wife, the man pretends
her vagina is made
of two mouths that have come
together as one. She has known
this man for seven years,
measures his pulse with her palms
when he comes, sees the dark circle
of drool next to his mouth in the morning—
but misses some part of himself he balances
between a lime and a line of ketchup.

RESOLUTION FOR A NEW YEAR

The father and his two month old fall
asleep as the night sky fattens itself
with confetti and fireshowers.

Sinking into his recliner, he doesn't feel
the flour sac of her chest deflate inside
the cradle of two crossed arms—
a lifetime defined by night sweats
and spilled champagne.

JUST AFTER WINTER

1.

At age 8, G.I. Joes slumped over
in defeat, my cousin and I unravel the mystery
of French kissing, rolling our tongue tips around
one another's, using Blow-Pops as a point
of reference—bringing us one step closer to manhood.

2.

At K-Mart, we steal pictures of black and
white models tagged to the backs of bras.
Rolling under-wires between thumb and forefinger,
we liken them to coat hangers bent out of shape
to hold boobs in place. We both have erections
tucked against the steel teeth of our jeans
neither of us would admit to—misunderstanding
the sedative coming later on in life.

3.

In the woods, we are architects of our own
universe, claiming territory with each parting of soil,
whittling an entire arsenal from rotted oak.

Even his sister Lauren comes along to lend a hand.
She and I go deeper into the forest to find more
branches for our fortress, trudging through the soup
of ground sucking at our heels. We stop
to rest at a tree split down its center, where I pull
my pants down above my knees. She follows
my lead. We press ourselves together, skin
shy of hair and the need to go further.

For a brief second,
we look past each other, into the light
scattered through a line of trees—
knowing we had not found what we knew
to be hiding beneath the body's disguise.

PANTOUM

I meditate on the break of line—the frail
communion of single sounds evades
meaning. You are dead. Words fail.
They are thread breaking at the slightest hint

of meaning. A communion of sound betrays
the metaphor of your laugh—your death
breaks apart at the hint of shaped meaning.
I want words to reverse the bullet's trajectory,

but metaphor is a small death: it searches
for teeth and returns with the fingers of a child.
words cannot stop the trajectory of our lives,
opening and closing, refusing to cross mine again,

like the fingers of children, hooked into one another
out of hope. I am the break of line, a frail
refusal to close, searching for your voice
in a thread of words. I have failed—we are still dead.

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