

The University of Southern Mississippi

QUARRY: POEMS

by

Christina Ann Rothenbeck

Abstract of a Dissertation  
Submitted to the Graduate School  
of The University of Southern Mississippi  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

August 2015

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ABSTRACT

QUARRY: POEMS

by Christina Ann Rothenbeck

August 2015

A book-length poetry manuscript including poems about hunting, illness, domesticity, illness, girlhood, and the body.

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## DEDICATION

For Sally Kugelmeyer, who showed me the road; Jim Harms and Mary Ann Samyn, who gave me the maps; and Angela Ball and Rebecca Morgan Frank, who got me to the destination. For the Poet Girls, who helped me endure the journey. And for my family, in loving thanks for their constant and unwavering patience and support.

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## INTRODUCTION

In *The Pink Guitar: Writing as Feminist Practice*, Rachel Blau DuPlessis argues, “A woman writer is a \*marked marker.\* She is marked by the cultural attributes of Woman, gender, sexuality, the feminine, a whole bolus of contradictory representations” (161). I believe that I, as a woman, am “marked” by inescapable gendered expectations from without, and that my performance of gender—including my writing—either conforms to or rebels against these expectations. I do not believe that I write like a woman (that is, from a stable, essential feminine self), but I believe I have no choice but to write as a woman, and the poems in *Quarry* are an exploration of what “writing as a woman” might mean—how I write about my lived experiences in my cultural and personal contexts with the consciousness of the framework into which I am placed by virtue of my identification as female. Perhaps the most important word in DuPlessis’s statement is contradictory—the poems in this manuscript are an attempt to negotiate the complicated and often contradictory nature of these experiences.

I am not the first woman to make these negotiations. The poems in *Quarry* owe a great deal to the “gurlesque” poets’ work in both poetry and poetics. Arielle Greenberg coined the term in 2001, in response to a trend she recognized in the writing of young, female poets; she characterizes the gurlesque poets as writing “poems of women’s experiences, of the female body and of sexuality, poems rooted... in the understanding of America as a rape culture” (“Some notes” 3-4). I am already thrust into the role of “woman poet” by virtue of being a woman and being a poet, but instead of positioning myself in opposition to that role, I choose to embrace it and use it as a position of strength rather than weakness. I have chosen to stake my claim in the gurlesque territory;

I want to write poems that explore my experiences as a woman in a complicated age (and what age hasn't been a complicated one in which to be a woman?). I am constantly pulled in too many directions, negotiating between my love for many of the trappings of femininity and my discomfort with what those trappings represent in the larger culture. I want to write honestly about desire and intimacy, about myself as a body in the world, and I am also constantly aware that my body is not entirely my own. The poems in *Quarry* explore the tension between desire and danger through a series of poems about hunting; they confront gendered expectations of domesticity through found poetry taken from handbooks for women and girls, and consider how to represent embodied experience, particularly the experience of illness.

The line between love and danger permeates the poems in *Quarry*; the title itself refers to both the hunt and the beast that is pursued, and in many cases the speaker is the pursued. The poems I call "the hunting poems" move throughout the manuscript as a unifying force, and are informed by both medieval courtly hunting traditions, which fascinate me with their symbolic connections and elaborate rituals, and modern hunting, with which I am much more familiar. My father is a hunter and was for a time in my childhood a trapper as well. This is not unusual in rural New Jersey; most of the men and boys I knew were hunters, either of deer or of small game, and though I have never hunted, I am familiar with the trappings of that culture: tree stands, compound bows, muzzle-loading rifles, and venison for dinner. This is also the culture in which my experiences of gender expectations and relationships were first formed, and the poems graft the lessons I learned in girlhood about the threat of violence against women onto the socially-acceptable violence of the largely masculine hunting culture of my childhood.

These poems position the vocabulary of desire and intimacy, as well as cultural expectations about beauty and courtship, alongside a sense of violence and danger, particularly the ritualized violence of hunting culture. In doing so, they are a way of dealing with my anxiety about the connection between desire and danger; they seek a way to become both subject and object, desired but not subsumed.

In the hunting poems, the anxiety of being both subject and object is made explicit, forcing the reader to recognize it. This tactic draws on the way the gurlisque tradition embraces the tension between subject and object, and complicates and subverts objectification by its insistence on recognizing it. In her foreword to the *Gurlesque* anthology, Lara Glenum writes, “It is...very difficult for female poets to speak of their embodied experience without being misread as positioning themselves as erotic objects” (20). To reflect the double consciousness that awareness of oneself as an object creates, I often create a lyric speaker who is at once the speaking subject of the poem and the object of the reader’s gaze; I situate the speaker most often as a prey animal. In this guise, she is either killed, as in “Maybe I Was the Doe,” or wary and watchful for danger, as in the title poem, “Quarry.” By positioning my speaker as a prey animal presenting herself to an unspecified “you” as the object of the hunt, the poems call attention to women’s experience as an object and make the reader complicit in this objectification. The poems try on the guise of the erotic object while making clear that it is artificial—after all, the speaker is often animal, or rather a human wearing an obviously fake animal mask.

In playing out their tensions and considerations on the natural world, the hunting poems in *Quarry* also owe a debt to Matt Rasmussen’s *Black Aperture*. Rasmussen’s opening poem, “Trajectory,” is a hunting scene in slow motion:

The bullet, spinning  
to maintain a shallow arc,  
carves a hot thread  
through the wind  
until it breaks one hair  
and the deer's neck  
splashes open. (lines 6-12)

Rasmussen's book coming to grips with his brother's suicide begins by displacing the violence of that suicide onto the hunting scene, angling indirectly toward the violent act the book will explore, and the field in which the opening scene takes place recurs through the book. In reading *Black Aperture*, the field became a place on which my own ideas play out as well; the deer I am interested in is not Rasmussen's deer at the moment of impact, but the deer in my own backyard and in the moments before a shot is fired. The shift in my poems from medieval hunting imagery to more modern representations of hunting culture came about at least in part thanks to the images of suburban/rural landscapes in his poems, which urged me to write about a world with which I am intimately familiar, making it strange again.

This shift from medieval hunting toward my own memories of the kind of hunting I grew up around also connects the hunting poems to memories of my childhood and adolescence; "Par-Force" is a constellation of girlhood memories: finding a dead deer in the backyard, lending my father nail polish for his rifle sight, and hitting a deer with my car. Because of this connection, poems about girlhood often overlap with the hunting poems; "First Crush" describes the speaker's first love skinning a squirrel he has killed.

This undercurrent of violence and sexuality is also evident in “Spring1983,” in which the speaker describes a childhood memory of asking about the word “rape” at six years old during a domestic scene of a mother folding sheets and towels. The connection between girlhood and hunting poems is more than autobiographical, as both sets of poems focus on making sense of the world from a feminine perspective.

Like the hunting poems, the girlhood poems draw on the gurlisque tradition to examine the feminine experience. Part of this connection lies in the way the gurlisque embraces girlhood; Greenberg connects this embracing of girlhood and girl culture with the riot grrl movement, which “sought to reclaim girlhood as a time of spontaneity and strength” (“On the Gurlisque,” n.p.), but girlhood in the gurlisque often also invokes possibilities of violence and a refusal to romanticize girlhood as innocent. My girlhood poems also refuse to romanticize girlhood, unless to imagine it as a moment of terrifying transformation and emotional turmoil is in itself a romanticization. “Thirteen” examines the contradictory nature of early adolescence as the speaker throws crabapples and also experiences the pressure/desire for sexualization in its final turn to the speaker’s unshaven legs and green bikini, as well as her mother’s discomfort with this change. DuPlessis asks in *The Pink Guitar*, “How do I ‘play’ the women whom I have been culturally given?” (158), and a number of poems of *Quarry* attempt to answer that. As a girl born at the tail-end of second-wave feminism to a mother who largely missed the movement, I grew up with conflicting messages: I was trained to be domestic and encouraged to become a doctor, expected to sit like a lady and yet allowed to play in the dirt. My mother simultaneously pushed me toward independence and told me that boys

didn't like girls who were too outspoken. Greenberg's essay "On the Gurllesque" notes this complicated and conflicted cultural time as well:

I see my girlhood, and the girlhoods of the poets named above, as part of a post-feminist moment, in that we were raised during an era in which feminism was part of the discourse but in which traditional notions of femininity and women's roles still held great power. (n.p.)

Being a part of this middle generation, raised with conflicting messages about femininity, informs my ideas of girlhood and, ultimately, womanhood. My uneasiness with a feminine identity comes through in poems like "My Mother on American Bandstand," which contrasts my mother's girlhood of crinolines and Dick Clark with my own love of punk music and inability to master even rudimentary levels of gracefulness, and "Forgive Me, Donna Reed, for I Have Sinned," which details my failures as a housekeeper. This ambivalence toward femininity and domesticity shows up throughout my found poetry work with domestic manuals and other advice books as well.

My work with found poetry draws on traditions of the domestic in both my own childhood and the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. My mother is, perhaps, a member of the last generation of old-fashioned housewives, having married and set up housekeeping in 1961, before many other pathways were open to a young woman from a working-class Irish family in rural New Jersey. Many of my childhood memories involve both watching and helping her hang out laundry, make baby food for my younger brother in an ancient avocado-green blender, and sew the family's clothing. By the age of eight or nine I was sewing my own doll clothes and embroidering Christmas ornaments. I loved (and in some cases, still love) the skills I acquired; many of the crafts I can create



are beautiful as well as useful. I am, however, at best ambivalent about domesticity—as much as I love my mastery of these skills, I also hate the gendered assumptions that accompany them—and my discomfort about those expectations finds voice in my domestic found poems. Most of the source materials I seek out are didactic texts of advice for women and girls in the nineteenth century. I am fascinated by the sheer volume of writing dedicated to teaching women and girls how to behave, both in the nineteenth century and today. While the actual advice begins to be more liberal in the late nineteenth century, the undercurrent of the texts continue to reinforce traditional expectations of feminine domesticity and obedience. Both “Hold Up Your Heads, Girls!” and “Often a Girl Gets Tired of Enjoying Herself” admonish girls against ambitions beyond gendered expectations of domesticity and feminine beauty, though the original texts insist on girls also undertaking “serious reading” and self-improvement of various kinds. By looking back to the nineteenth century, I hope the poems show how those expectations echo even into the twenty-first century, and by performing a kind of demented, if well-meaning, domesticity, I hope to push back against those expectations.

My method for creating found poetry is more purposeful than earlier methods like Mac Low’s cut-up methods, in that I do not randomly connect pieces of text. The found poetry I create is in some measure related to Mary Ruefle’s erasures, in which she skims a single page of text for words she wants to use and then blocks out the rest without regard to the actual content of the original text. Ruefle argues that erasure is a kind of formal constraint, in that she is restricted to the words on a given page; this restriction creates a set of grammatical and spatial rules that inform the outcome of the poem (n.p.). I believe that my found poems follow a similar kind of formal conceit, but my own rules

are different from Ruefle's in that I use whole books, or whole sections of books, as my source text, and I can combine the words and phrases I find in any order I see fit, rather than having to rely on their placement on the page. In short, my "remix" method has more freedom than Ruefle's erasures and more authorial intent than Mac Low's cut-ups. For my found poems, I mine the original text for odd phrases, evocative language, and useful images, essentially making a digital cut-up rather than a physical one. Once I have a large selection of words and phrases from which to choose, I begin trying to fit the pieces together in new configurations to create juxtapositions and new meanings. My focus is on more ephemeral works; domestic manuals, advice books for girls, and pamphlets about sensible clothes for high schoolers are of little interest beyond certain academic or hobbyist circles, but I am fascinated by them as a record of women's experiences.

I attempt to create poems that do not necessarily change the subject of the original works (from domesticity to, say, love or death), but rather fracture their intent, make them stranger than their original messages. "It Is in the Hope of Being Useful That the Following Instructions Are Offered:" and "Suggestions for School Dress" depart the most from their original source material, speaking more to larger questions of femininity than to the original aims of needlework patterns and giving girls sensible clothing that will allow them to focus on their studies. Even when I shift the meaning, I work to retain the texts' voice of disembodied, impersonal authority, which generally sounds a bit high-handed. "A Home Art" retains that scolding tone with its final lines, "Why cannot a girl welcome/ some tiresome commission/ with a perfectly unruffled face?" My remixing of the source material attempts to bring out this undercurrent of scolding perfectionism,

rendering the language more claustrophobic and didactic than the originals. The insistence on the trivial in these poems, I hope, makes their speakers rather ridiculous, and highlights the impossibility of the pressure that domestic expectations exert, even in the modern world.

The pressures of domesticity are explicitly gendered, just as my conflation of desire and danger is rooted in girlhood and its lessons. These pressures grow in some measure out of expectations placed on the feminine body, and the poems in this manuscript play out their issues on the body as well; the body is the locus for questions of desire and danger, power and memory. Metaphorically or actually, the body remains a constant presence, as when, in “First Crush,” the speaker feels bile rising in her throat at the sight of the skinned squirrel, or in “Solitary,” the poem describes the feeling of a body made entirely from sugar. My awareness of the body follows the traditions of feminist poetry, in which the body is the stage on which larger anxieties about women’s experiences of the world play out. As Glenum has pointed out, women’s awareness of themselves is partially an awareness of themselves as a body, and that body as the object of others’ scrutiny. That double consciousness is something I attempted to capture in “Anatomical Venus,” a poem inspired by European wax anatomical models of the eighteenth century, which combined ideals of feminine beauty with dissection to create beautiful women with removable parts. The poem attempts to make the power dynamic inherent in the gaze obvious to the viewer by presenting a monologue in the voice of the figure, conflating sexualized and domestic language with dissection imagery. Through a sonnet in the voice of a woman meant to be looked at, the poem interrogates the ways in which the feminine body is always on display.

While the body and physicality are constantly invoked in *Quarry*, some poems are more explicitly about the body itself. These poems grapple with what it means to live and work with a body that fails, that can't keep up, that makes life difficult. I have been living with an autoimmune disorder for the past fifteen years, though I have only recently been trying to come to terms with what that means through writing. My disorder causes bouts of extreme fatigue and pain, dizzy spells and migraines, making it difficult at times to manage everyday tasks. If I try to ignore the fact that I have a body, try to push ahead without regard for health, my body reminds me, often harshly, that it is not to be taken for granted. In addition to my larger illness, I also occasionally sleepwalk, and my body literally carries on without my consciousness. There may be no ignoring the body, but there is no understanding it, either.

Because my illness is invisible, it is difficult to explain, and I have often in the past been met with frustration or suspicion. In her essay "Grand Unified Theory of Female Pain," Leslie Jamison points to a 2001 study that found women who report pain to doctors are more likely to be given sedatives than pain medication; there is a persistent assumption that women's pain is not actually real (n.p.). Moreover, she points out that in writing, women's pain is often stylized and romanticized or deflected with irony. Jamison also asks, "How do we talk about these wounds without glamorizing them?" Because my pain is sometimes a very real fact of life, I need to be able to write about my own experiences of my body. On the other hand, as DuPlessis notes, there are "the women whom I have been culturally given," and a great many of those women are wounded, from the heroines of nineteenth-century fiction to Sylvia Plath's injured women in *Ariel*,

and however personal my own pain is, the cultural narrative pushes me in its predetermined paths.

I have tried a variety of methods to combat slipping into the dominant narratives while trying to represent illness and pain as part of my own experience. In “Backstory,” I mix my experiences with illness into a series of other images that constellate around the time frame fifteen years ago when I began to first experience symptoms. The poem itself is simply a list of images, resisting any narrative at all and thereby resisting easily-reproduced narratives about pain and the body. “Sleepwalker” creates a series of metaphors for the experience of a body that continues on after the speaker goes to sleep. Both “Oneirology” and “This is Getting a Little Desperate” explore the illness of others after my sister’s diagnosis with a chronic form of leukemia; the first uses dreamlike surrealist images while the second attempts to interject humor into the considerations—the mind avoiding pain through triviality. “Oh My Darling” explores infertility through a childhood belief that swallowed seeds could grow inside a body, exploring the emotional impact of infertility by connecting it with an entirely different narrative.

Lucille Clifton’s poems about her breast cancer in *The Terrible Stories* inform these poems of illness, though my own poems are less direct in their considerations. Clifton’s vulnerability encouraged my willingness to explore my own physical experiences; my earlier poems followed her direct engagement much more closely, but my interest in rendering an emotional rather than literal account of my illness has turned the poems more toward lyric surrealism than confessionalism. “I Could Be Your Bird” creates a speaker begging someone to cure her, but the request itself takes on a surrealist edge as the speaker first imagines herself as a wounded bird, then pictures the speaker

shrinking into her own bloodstream to act as a filter. These poems aim to transform illness and pain into metaphor, not to beautify it necessarily, but to render it more accurately and in a more personal way.

Like “I Could Be Your Bird,” many of the poems in the manuscript loosely follow the sonnet form in length and rhetorical structure; for me, the sonnet serves as a necessary restraint. Gregory Orr’s “Four Temperaments and the Forms of Poetry” makes a distinction between what he calls “limiting” and “limitless” temperaments; structure and story are what he calls limiting, while imagination and music are limitless (n.p.). Orr argues that poems are most successful when they balance all four temperaments, but especially that “for a poem to have the stability and dynamic tension that comes of a marriage of contraries, it must fuse a limiting impulse with an impulse that resists limitation” (n.p.). Because my natural poetic tendencies run toward imagination and music, without some kind of external form, my poems run the risk of going off the rails. In “Changeling,” for example, the sonnet structure gives a sense of wholeness that might otherwise be lacking, and a definite stopping point to limit the meandering of imaginative leaps between images. Without the container the sonnet structure provides for this poem, it could keep leaping between associative images indefinitely, losing the tension between the closed structure and the open imaginative associations.

Poems about hunting place the body in peril and poems about illness describe its limits; girlhood poems connect to the pressures of domesticity, and poems about solitude, desire, danger, and dreams play out my obsessions and questions throughout *Quarry*. They do so from the perspective of a woman poet. I am conscious of that position as being in some measure culturally imposed, and the poems play with that consciousness

and with what it means to be feminine in American culture in the twenty-first century. If I am a “marked marker,” I want to make the markings evident, to show the artificiality of expectations predicated on gender. By creating conversations between domestic expectations and awareness of one’s body as an object (and possibly the object of danger) and examining girlhood without romanticizing it, the poems in this manuscript speak to an individual experience as a member of a larger social order. I am placed into a tradition of women poets by my identity, but I also choose to embrace that tradition as part of my poetic lineage as well.

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## PAR-FORCE

My father borrowed nail polish to paint  
his rifle scope, Cherries in the Snow  
drawing a bead to guide his sight, tipping  
my fingers bloody as the hard-packed ground  
beneath the dogwood, the doe steaming  
head down and flayed open to the cold.  
Later I painted my fingers gunmetal, held  
my body taut and poised as a weapon, wanted  
to be some kind of destruction. My hunting  
tools blunter, the front of an old Chevy, the deer  
arcing a parabola of wild-kicking hooves  
above my head. I never even saw it coming.

## SMALL WARS

Ants made inroads on my porch, busy caravans.  
I dusted cinnamon across the threshold,  
encouraged the spiders *spin faster, my allies*.  
I've been reading about the Borgias,  
the Pope's unholy children, sex in the castle  
of angels, days of wine and arsenic in the mouth  
of God. I baited the ants—boric acid and honey, waited  
for a sweet death. I wanted to vanquish something.  
Loneliness means when the three-inch cockroach lands  
on the bedroom ceiling at midnight  
you will be the one swinging the tennis racket.  
I can't walk barefoot through the house, the junebugs  
keep blundering into the kitchen and dying  
horribly, twitching on their backs. I haven't spoken  
aloud in three days. This is how things escalate:  
I tracked the ants to their source, poured  
the powdered acid straight into the crack.  
I miss them, a little. It's so much easier when you know  
your enemy, when it's right there in front of you.

## THIRTEEN

Everything feels like transgression  
and I love it, lie sweating  
on the carpet  
plucking sticky cloth  
away from my stomach  
before the box fan's whirring,  
laugh at jokes I know just enough  
to know are dirty, walk  
the trestle above Route 31  
to the Dairy Queen in my cutoffs,  
whip fallen crabapples  
at cars from the empty lot.  
I haven't even started  
shaving my legs, body  
dotted with fresh chicken pox  
scars shoved suddenly into a neon  
green bikini, my mother doubtful  
in the dressing room  
*are you sure you really want...*

## SUGGESTIONS FOR SCHOOL DRESS

The girl who displays good judgement should wear substantial material, designed to withstand the wear and tear to which she will be subjected. Many girls fail to realize they may overcome their physical makeup as thoroughly as their dispositions. This care is not wisely exercised by the girl with the debutante slouch. Dangling tassels make the owner conspicuous. Remember that a hat should always serve a double function. Plaids are fatal. Every seam is a danger zone.

## HIGH SCHOOL

You were feral, girls,  
ratted bangs massed high,  
eyes lined hard and small  
like possums, lunging rabid  
in the hallways. *Bitch*.  
Nails sharp and scrabbling,  
the way the hens behind  
the Ag building pecked  
and gouged each other bloody,  
mobbed the weakest first.  
I watched. I kept my face  
tight, unreadable. I waited.

## BESTIARY: RULES FOR HAWKS

Nuns carry their hooded merlins  
to vespers, the transept alive  
with rustling wings. The holywater  
clerk may keep a sparrowhawk, a prince  
a peregrine. New birds are netted  
with decoy pigeons, feathers  
camouflaging the string to bind their feet.  
Barons may fly the bastarde hawk,  
squires a lanner. Young birds are easier  
to train but scream incessantly. Old birds  
can never be fully trusted to return.  
One method for training requires sewing  
shut the eyelids: by looping the thread  
over the hawk's head, the eyes  
may be raised and lowered at will.

## LIGHT AS A FEATHER, STIFF AS A BOARD

*It's your turn* they say,  
girls gone giddy and a little cruel  
in the nightlight, girls in pajamas, sleeping  
bags in a circle on the living room floor.  
*You get to die, lie down.*  
I assume coffin posture, cross  
my hands ready for the rosary.  
Tonight the planchette glided itself  
beneath my fingers while no one watched  
and I snatched my hand away, startled.  
Fingers squirm bony under my back,  
my ticklish ribs. My best friend pushes  
me backward, pets my temples, invents  
the story of my death. I sink down  
into the dark well of myself,  
my flowered nightgown belled out  
at the bottom billowing sail of a little ship.

## A HOME ART

If the undone work goes to waste  
you will never be more than  
a cucumber on the ground.  
Life seems choked by tiny  
interruptions, delusions  
about the power of sitting idle  
and chatting. You are tempted  
to throw it all up, read your lessons  
backwards, leave the riddle  
unsolved, be the easy-going  
sister who makes no struggle.  
Why cannot a girl welcome  
some tiresome commission  
with a perfectly unruffled face?



## FIRST CRUSH

The squirrels are shameless,  
clattering across the fence,  
mounting one another  
in the bare wisteria. They rub  
nose to tail the length  
of their bodies. At thirteen,  
bodies never touching, I fit  
myself chaste and tongue-tied  
beside him in a twin bed, married  
us in a twining of initials.  
That spring, I stifled the bile  
rising at the back of my throat,  
watched him rip off a pelt  
with his Bowie knife,  
the squirrel bloody and  
unrecognizable in its nakedness.

## HIGH SCHOOL

The boys I knew were loaded guns,  
half-cocked mouthing off in hallways  
slipping hands in back pockets laughing  
low and dirty through their crosshairs.  
I was a field rabbit, trapped  
brown and startled, scuttling between  
the lockers. I willed myself  
invisible and bulletproof, but  
I loved them like the rabbit might  
love the rifle, frozen fascinated  
at the barrel of its own destruction.  
I wanted to solve their complex  
physics, balance their stocks against  
my shoulder, pull the trigger.

## I DREAM ABOUT BRINGING MY BOYFRIEND TO MY 20<sup>TH</sup> REUNION

My boyfriend was a feral cat straining at pigeons on the lawn.

My boyfriend was a felt puppet with a red sequin tongue.

My boyfriend was a turtle in a shoebox, scrabbling on his back.

I grabbed the scruff of his neck and hefted his furry weight against my chest.

I got drunk and extremely loquacious, answered all the questions for us both.

I turned the box over until I heard his little claws scratching. I cut some air holes.

All the other girls loved my boyfriend's soft, soft fur and made little cooing sounds.

Everyone laughed at our jokes and the way his red tongue lolled and sparkled.

They all wanted to feed him lawn clippings and strawberries, stroke his shell.

The cat gouged my chest with his claws and leapt free for the woods.

The dummy slumped into an inert bundle of clothes in my arms.

The turtle transformed himself to a rock, useless.

And then I had to face them.

And then I had to face them.

And then I had to face them.

## MAYBE I WAS THE DOE

Snow on the shorn cornfield squeaked  
underfoot in the cold, breath steamed  
bright against the air. I was a body in a field  
of other bodies and we stepped lightly,  
twitched our ears for the unfamiliar, searched  
for late wineberries glowing against the white.  
I smelled the creeping musk meaning *danger*—  
then white tails flagging all around,  
then the crack and I fell, dazed and spilling.

### HOLD UP YOUR HEADS, GIRLS!

How much there is for you to do! The training  
of a window garden, the collecting of newspaper slips,  
the making of bread. There are too many November days,  
the world is not sunshiny enough. You ought to be  
more familiar with Nature, adorn yourself with the graces  
of conversation. You ought to see more, acquire  
all the knowledge of the kitchen, laundry, sewing room,  
dishwashing with daily increases into dishwashing.  
If a girl learns her lessons and tries to think,  
she is all at once confounded. What is to be done?  
A false stroke of the brush changes angel into demon,  
a blow of the mallet shivers the statue to fragments.

## SPRING 1983

Sheets and towels fresh  
from the clothesline, rough  
rectangles draped  
against the nubby green couch.  
I bury my face in them  
to smell the wind, look up to  
ask my mother what *rape* means.  
My mother's eyes are dark and still.  
I am six years old.  
She believes children only ask  
what they need to be told.

## RAPTOR

First the net, my body's strained beating  
against ropes. Blindness as a hood dropped  
across my eyes, left the rustle of feathers  
and scent of other wings, the perch

all I could know for sure. A voice  
and the leather jesses held me fast,  
the two of us alone in the windowless  
room. Again and again

I threw myself against the straps,  
tore with talons at the hand offering  
gobbets of meat until, ravenous,  
I weakened. I learned to ride the wrist,

be thrown to motion with a cry, grasp  
the prey's throat with intelligent feet.  
I learned to let it go to his hands, to return  
when whistled, let the sky go dark.

## OFTEN A GIRL GETS TIRED OF ENJOYING HERSELF

You live with people in books, idle about  
after breakfast, poetry and pastry  
the same self-indulgence, the recesses  
of an untidy drawer. It may be no one's business  
that you are alone a good deal, that you alter  
considerably. Prayer, tidiness, self-control.  
Practice these in daily unselfishness.  
You should have something to show  
for your morning: When you are dressed,  
carefully and prettily dressed,  
your soul is dressed in God's armor.



## BESTIARY: THE HOUNDS

Flush the fox from cover, lope shoulder  
to shoulder, give tongue to the babble

of desire or run silent, gazehounds after a flash  
of prey amidst the branches, hurl headlong after

the doe, obedient and blood-crazed, lock jaws  
against the boar, the bear, until whipped

off the carcass cringing. Serve a master and do not  
forsake his body even in death. Come when called,

content with the fireside, the feeding dish,  
the iron chain around the throat.

## QUARRY

Caution trained this body untouchable,  
frozen wild-eyed, chin lifted, scenting  
trouble on the wind. I learned misdirection:  
to double back through the creek, muddle  
the trail, leave hounds dwelling, stymied.  
I burrowed in bolt holes, camouflaged  
with last year's leaves. Forgive me, I forgot  
that I was not the deer, not the rabbit's  
thin keening in the jaws of a fox.

## DOE FEVER

Again the white field, stippled  
with last fall's cornstalks, bare trees  
knuckling up toward sky. Breath  
of snow burning the air, your finger  
tense and silent on its trigger.  
If I stepped rustling into this scene now,  
what would happen? Fever strikes  
two ways: the body freezes, misses  
its chance. Or, overeager, fires blindly,  
strikes the delicate leg, wounding instead  
of the clean kill, the deer limping  
a bloodstained trail back into the wood.  
They believed deer's hearts could cure  
troubles when mixed with tears. If I offer  
you mine, you should take aim so carefully.

## THERE'S A GIRL IN THIS HOUSE WHO'S IN LOVE WITH A GHOST

She can be me if you want. The ghost can mean something.

Let's say she's me. Let the ghost be whatever you want.

Tiny hills of sand keep appearing in the driveway.

I was thinking about ghosts and now I can't stop thinking

about ants taking over the driveway. I pour boiling water

over them but they come back, haunted by their own

tiny ghosts. They recognize one another by smell.

I once smelled a boy on my hands hours after leaving him.

I put my hands in the back of his jacket, woke up

with the ghost of him on my fingers. The ghosts wake

the girl up, weights pressing into her empty bed. Someday

she will die too. The house will be full of ghosts,

and the ants will keep going on with their small lives.

## II

## ONEIROLOGY

I'm exhausted from saving you all night, running  
out of houses with you in my arms. You were a bird,  
once, and I pulled you from the water, warmed  
your feathery weight against my chest.

The roads became rivers and I swam them, hid  
in an attic, huddled behind a wall. The soldiers  
were the sound of boots and Paris was full  
of cats and lavatories, basements with dripping sinks.

You are always missing, there is always a shadow  
in the corner, another rooftop to jump across.

I had to tell you something, but I had a mouth  
full of sewing pins pressing my tongue down,  
rolling between my fingers as I pried them out, piled  
them in a small bowl. There was no end to them.

## BACKSTORY

Before this, a diner. A nervous  
breakdown. My hands shaking.

Neon on the coffee cups. The tilt  
of the world as I fell inside it.

My name through a microphone.  
My body shrinking, growing, shrinking.

A pair of velvet sneakers. Hands  
full of chalk dust. Cinder block walls.

Shards of hair in the sink. Blood  
came and came and then didn't.

Swings in the park at midnight.  
Gravel. The bandage on my finger.

Flowered quilt in the backseat.  
*Have you seen this girl?*

The county fair Tilt-A-Whirl. Crack  
of my skull against metal.

Cigarettes on the front steps.  
The girl-body running. Always running.

## THIS IS GETTING A LITTLE DESPERATE

The dead cat in the road turned out  
to be an opossum. The buzzards were actually  
buzzards. All day long I've been thinking  
*Lord make me an instrument of thy peace.*

A bassoon, maybe. I'd like a deeper voice.  
I told the dispatcher there was a dead cat  
and I'm afraid the road crew will laugh at me,  
think I can't tell the difference, stupid city girl.

I want everyone to love me, even road crews.  
My mother's voice on the phone is a cracked plate,  
jagged around the edges of her vowels:  
*sister, platelets, biopsy, oncologist.*

I think I would like to be the cymbals of peace  
instead, crashing while the road crew never shows  
up, the opossum withers into shards and leather,  
drowning out *heredity, sickness, blood.*



## GIRL'S GUIDE TO THE APOCALYPSE

Everywhere: a city waiting to die, and who knows  
waiting better than you? Just a little push to the bed  
rock and it'll buckle, plates shuddering  
as they shatter against each other. What's sexier  
than plate tectonics, really? The hills rolling  
themselves over, tsunami like a giant tongue.  
You'd be amazed what steam can do for skin,  
how it will silver, how it all slides clean  
from the bone. Don't be caught dead without  
your lipstick. What outfit matches your potential  
for mass chaos? Under your feet, fire always burns  
its way to the surface. Put your shoes on. Grab your axe.

## MIGRAINE

I spent three days giddy on the sofa  
tracing my Prime Meridian, my ring of fire,  
and considered how, in my last apartment,  
silverfish chewed through all the laundry  
I'd left piled on the bathroom floor  
until I emerged from the darkened bedroom  
to find my T-shirts lacy with holes,  
had to wear the evidence of something's  
hunger with my skin peeking through.  
On television, the atomic bomb  
cratered the New Mexico desert over  
and over, and I thought about the people  
watching from their lawn chairs,  
how the spectacle shattered them.

## SOLITARY

I know the volume of a teaspoon in the mouth,  
scrape of sugar against the tongue. It sinks  
into the body as if it were made from it, as if it could  
transubstantiate: flesh made sticky as syrup, crystals  
dusting the skin like sand, tangling eyelashes.  
The body a grainy column, melting in the rain.  
I roll through the apple of my lit apartment  
like a seed, all bitterness and potential, a little bit  
of poison at the core. Days pass in spoonfuls  
denied, in the bed's single dent. All through  
the long winter, the body hoards its sweetness,  
stops sap at the root, immures itself in cloisters  
of wax and abnegation, walls dripping with honey.

## AVOSKA

Today I believe in nothing but the cardinal  
on the fence, red like a pinup girl's lipstick.  
Once, I was running in a girl-body, the rowan tree  
alight with berries. *Twinkle-toes*, my mother called me.  
Also tootsie, also chickadee, also bee. I woke up  
thirty-five and hungry, her face in my mirror.  
I think I'll answer to any name said kindly:  
use the voice you keep for coaxing small animals  
with sharp teeth, use the nets. I'm putting on  
my one good dress, black and silvered with sequins,  
because I can't be sure I'm not the only girl left  
in the world, and it's best to be prepared.

## MY MOTHER ON AMERICAN BANDSTAND

Girls dressed like cupcakes in 1959,  
five crinolines frothing beneath skirts  
held wide like their arms around partners,  
leaving room for the Holy Spirit, their girdles  
hanging slack around skinny thighs.  
Somewhere in a Pennsylvania steel town  
high school gym, Dick Clark grinned  
at the camera and my mother twisted  
her hips. She skipped Mass every morning,  
climbed to the roof to hide from prying nuns,  
walked a steel bridge every weekend  
to the Easton High football game, made eyes  
at the public school boys. How unfair  
for her to have a daughter without rhythm—  
I never managed even the Electric Slide, the only  
dancing I did was brutal, throwing myself  
into the pit windmilling, pushing back the crowd  
around me. *Grace*, my father called me, named  
for what I'm lacking, what I can't seem to learn.

## OH MY DARLING

The calyx grips the thin skin with its five-petaled  
fist, ghost of the flower that began it. Inside,  
bundles of fibers and the split grin of seeds  
like milk teeth, so small  
my tongue can't feel them to spit and I swallow.  
As a girl I believed every seed  
I swallowed would grow, that my stomach  
would swell with melons, a cherry tree  
sprout from the top of my head.  
I made careful piles of pits at the edge  
of my plate. I made sure I stayed empty.  
I sang at the top of my lungs  
how you were lost and gone forever.  
I forget—  
is fruit the ovary or the womb?

## MAYBE IT'S LIKE THIS—

Ground bees tunnel their hives  
just below the surface of the soil.  
Tiny catacombs of spit and mud,  
and inside it, drone of a thousand wings.  
Nothing visible from above, maybe  
the field pushing up a little  
at the center, a swollen belly humming.  
The summer I was nine,  
my father poured gasoline at sunset,  
tossed a match. It burned all night.  
In the morning, the air smelled scorched.  
Stray bees came back to it all summer,  
and then they stopped.

## I COULD BE YOUR BIRD

Say you could cup me feather light  
in your palms, crumble  
yolk for my gaping mouth, calm  
my stunned flurry against the glass.  
Say I were easily helpless, something  
without claws, bedraggled  
in the box's cardboard corner, shivering  
beneath your soothing hand.  
Or say you could shrink into me,  
swim the tinny backwash of my blood,  
filter the angry flotsam. Say you could save  
me with your own imperfect body, break  
my fever like a window, leave me  
drenched and grateful on the other side.



## FORGIVE ME, DONNA REED, FOR I HAVE SINNED

It has been three weeks since I last vacuumed the carpet.

Don't even ask about the windows. My begonias  
died in a January frost—their skeletons still droop  
in a pot by the front door. Pathetic, I know.

Let me tell you about the pile of junk mail mildewing  
on the porch, the mound of laundry in the closet,  
coffee cups and cereal bowls multiplying in the sink.

There were things in the fridge I could no longer identify,  
so I threw them out still tucked up in their Tupperware.

I ate canned soup and a sleeve of saltines every night  
for dinner, I did not finish my milk. I turned out the lights  
and pretended not to be home so no one could see  
the state of my end tables, so no one would notice  
that I had not taken my pajamas off all weekend.

## SLEEPWALKER

The body comes unmoored, a boat  
threading dark water, unmanned

vessel, ghost in my machine. Wires  
stripped and sparking, the body

hotwires itself and joyrides off.  
Or is it ridden like a horse, unbridled,

mane tangled in a jockey's fingers,  
left lathered and panting

after running the wild hunt?

In the morning, I wake

weary, without memory,  
blooming new bruises.

## THE FIRST METAPHOR

I dreamed last night of being held; when I woke  
twisted, my arms ached with reaching, a queer pain  
between the wings of my shoulder blades.

The bed is too big this morning, I am adrift.  
I want to wash up on the shores of some man's island,  
light a signal: *this way, I am here*.

There is no record of the first metaphor,  
first need too complicated for its own word.  
What were they searching for, the way my hands

mime the action when I forget simple words—  
anomia, the forgetting of names; not *match*,  
but *this is to make fire*. I am always reaching

for something I can't call into being,  
like the name of God, like a heart's desire:  
*I want, I want*. I think it must have been for love,

fumbling for a way to beg *I need you like*  
water, like air, like all those little frogs in spring  
singing *please, oh please, oh please*.

IT IS IN THE HOPE OF BEING USEFUL THAT THE FOLLOWING  
INSTRUCTIONS ARE OFFERED:

The work must always, if possible, lie—  
among all good housewives of any civilised country, it is reckoned  
an indispensable accomplishment, a purely mechanical  
labour, and as such most useful.

Keep the hands in position, guide with the unoccupied fingers.

Nothing can be more light and graceful than this  
useful alphabet, veined in parts and ornamented with tendrils.

Ladies may now confidently commence, with our patterns  
before them, to reproduce

care and patience, to perfect the beautiful  
work other hands have brought to a conclusion.

This pattern is composed of leaves and flowers.

This pattern is suitable for trimming. This rosette is suitable.

This pattern is suitable. This pattern is meant.

## WEATHER IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

All those melting heroines, soaked  
to the corset hauling their sodden  
muslin, dripping ribbons, their hair  
a river down their backs. The only  
cure for a broken heart is this feeble  
limping in the rain, the inevitable  
fever, the hectic brilliance of cheeks  
matched by splotches of blood  
on the lace-edged handkerchiefs.  
Who can save the fallen women  
from their overturned carriages?  
Who will carry them to bed and  
administer, tenderly, the leeches?

## GHOST STORY

At the Salisbury, Maryland, Salvation Army,  
a blind man tells me this story in exchange  
for a cigarette: An old woman took a bucket  
out the back door to pick figs for breakfast.  
Never came back. The whole town  
linked arms and searched, found the bucket  
half-full and buzzing with wasps, no other  
trace. Another man went missing years  
later, complained the woods were calling him.  
That time, no one searched, let the woods take  
what it seemed was theirs. The man's eyes  
are bluish white like skim milk, focused  
just past me. I think of the woods  
behind my house hungry and rustling,  
and wonder if the woman got to eat at least  
one fig, and what the man is seeing over  
my left shoulder. I think it must be some comfort  
when you are old, at least to see the dead.

## OUR BODIES CAN BECOME DIAMONDS

They capture the carbon at cremation,  
press it tightly until it twinkles,  
little dead stars winking. We can't tell  
which stars are really living—  
we could be the only ones still burning  
and not find out for billions of years.  
Did you know every apple grows  
a little star inside? Or say it's a blossom,  
ghost petals shadowing the flesh.  
You can grow five trees from one apple,  
but the fruit won't be edible—  
all good apple trees are grafted.  
There's an orchard somewhere  
where they're preserving every variety.  
There's a coal town in Pennsylvania  
that's been on fire for fifty years.  
There's a vault in the Arctic full of seeds.

## SOME DAYS, I JUST WANT TO LOVE THE ORDINARY

Un-oiled gate of a blue jay's song,  
flash of towhee in the side yard,  
its one-note shriek, and the woodpecker's  
lunatic laughter before it beats its head  
against the magnolia again. A sudden eruption  
of resurrection lilies in the empty lot  
where fire took the house two years ago.  
That where my sidewalk used to be out front  
is a path of wild mint, tiny purple flowers  
where the feral orange tomcat rolls.  
How my porche's screen door blows open  
and the wasps fly through, stumble blindly  
at the windows, mistaking them for sky.



## CHANGELING

I could knit my own twin out of wire,  
a little yarn for hair. Ghost double, mirror's mirror,  
little parasite—I can be so crafty, she could be  
a real girl, and I'm Pygmalion, or is it Narcissus  
in love with myself? We all have our personal myths.  
In mine I will be a lion with a human face, medieval  
allegory. There was no difference then  
between a lion and a leopard, between a lion and a dragon.  
A woman could give birth to rabbits if she wanted to,  
the world had an edge—you could sail right up to it  
and fall off. I'll make a boat of all the words  
I've swallowed, the unspeakable growing inside  
me, bundle of hair and bone and teeth. I've been hiding  
this so carefully. If the doctors find it, they will cut it out.

## ANATOMICAL VENUS

I have stripped myself bare, unbound  
my hair to spill across silk pillows, wrapped  
the pearl necklace across my throat. I am nothing  
if not beautiful, if not accommodating. See how  
cleanly I open, hold my pose still, each layer  
peeled back again and again. Bundles of nerves  
branched against corded muscle can be lifted away  
to showcase organs shining gently beneath. Consider  
the curve of my pancreas, my voluptuous lungs,  
careful embroidery of vein against bone.  
So many hands have brushed my sternum, fit pieces  
back together, closed the lid until the next unveiling.  
I do not watch. Turned away, only my eyes are modest.  
There is nothing I have not shown you.

## NOTES

p. 4. Found text from *Appropriate Clothes for the High School Girl*, 1920.

pp. 8 & 16. Found text from *Stray Thoughts for Girls*, 1903.

p. 13. Found text from *Hold Up Your Heads, Girls! Helps for Girls, in School and Out*, 1886.

p. 36. Found text from *Beeton's Book of Needlework*, 1870.

“Changeling,” “Spring 1983,” “Avoska,” “The First Metaphor,” “Maybe it’s like this—,” and “There’s a Girl in This House Who’s in Love With a Ghost” were published as part of the chapbook *Girls in Art*, dancing girl press, 2012.

“Forgive Me, Donna Reed, for I Have Sinned” and “Oh My Darling” first appeared in *Product*.

“Girl’s Guide to the Apocalypse” first appeared in *Bone Bouquet*.

“It is in the hope of being useful that the following instructions are offered:” and

“Oneirology” first appeared in *Reunion: Dallas Review*.

“Small Wars” first appeared in *Sugar House Review*.

“Solitary” first appeared in *Switchback*.