

HUNGRY GHOST

Natalie A. Giarratano, B.A.

Thesis Prepared for the Degree of
MASTER OF ARTS

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH TEXAS

May 2005

APPROVED:

Bruce Bond, Major Professor
Corey Marks, Committee Member
Scott Simpkins, Committee Member
Brenda R. Sims, Chair of Graduate Studies in
English
James Tanner, Chair of the Department of
English
Sandra L. Terrell, Dean of the Robert B.
Toulouse School of Graduate Studies

Giarratano, Natalie A., Hungry Ghost. Master of Arts (English - Creative Writing), May 2005, 54 pp., references, 6 titles.

Hungry Ghost is a collection of poetry that examines the relationships between fathers and daughters, sisters, and one's selves.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Bruce Bond and Corey Marks for their time, patience, and knowledge. These two men have helped me shape the preface and poems of this thesis through their mentorship. They have shown me all of the wonderful places my poetry can go and made me want to work harder to find these places.

I would also like to thank the members of my poetry group for helping me shape my poems as well. The meticulous feedbacks from Brianna Pike, Michael Levan, Crystal Elerson, and Terry Smith have helped me become a better reviser of my own poems and critic of poetry in general. This group of people also encourages and inspires me to continue writing because they make my writing feel worthy of being read.

Thanks to my family for their support of my writing. Angela Duplechin, my mother, and my sisters Amanda Matoushek, Michelle Giarratano, and Regina Giarratano give me the inspiration I need to look inside myself through my writing and hopefully change through my writing as well. Thanks also to my fiancé, Zachary Green, whose computer knowledge has saved this thesis on numerous occasions and whose love is the reason I still make an effort to find the beauty in this world.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	ii
PART I: PREFACE	
Searching the Shadows for Fruits of Individualism	2
Bibliography	19
PART II: COLLECTION OF POEMS	
One.....	21
I've Looked Upon <i>the Naked Man with Knife</i>	22
Souvenir	23
Hollow Song	24
For Emphasis	26
The Condition.....	27
Two.....	28
Shattered Ceramic	29
12 Whitmans	30
Kobendza Oak	31
Coffee Can Worms.....	32
Superfly	33
English Leather	34
In Your House	35
Look Away	36

Three	37
Sins Revisited	38
Red Exposure	39
Visions of a Cheeseburger	40
Hovering.....	41
Sugar Blues	42
Dammed	43
Pawning Your Game	44
Four	45
Hungry Ghost.....	46
The Tunnel.....	47
Exodus	48
Ashes	49
Blur.....	50
Guinea Pig	51
First Born	52
Fight Pattern	53
Eve's Transference	54

PART I
PREFACE

Searching the Shadows for Fruits of Individualism

Beyond my anxiety, beyond this writing,
the universe waits, inexhaustible, inviting.
~Jorge Luis Borges

I tasted God for many years until I could no longer ignore the bitter nagging of His flesh on my tongue. The acrid flavor of a deity potentially reminds us of the trials that such a mutilated body might have endured. Unfortunately for my Catholic family, my brain clicked with bizarre interpretations of the sacred Eucharist as a cannibalistic, sadistic ritual. In adolescence, I began to picture Christ naked to all of his faithful who, in return for the sacrifices he already made for their sins, would peel pieces of flesh from his body as if they were stripping soft petals from an unopened rose.

The grisliness and sublimity of Catholicism activated what would later become a morbid, quirky, and perhaps grotesquely beautiful outlook on my surroundings. I also rescued the idea that other people's closed petals should be stripped off much in the way that Christ was being stripped at every Catholic Mass. This meant I had to put away the Christian belief of God as the ultimate judge so that I could become a judge myself. I had written fragments of stories before, but through my own reading experiences, poetry seemed to have a very unique power in the compactness of the language. I began to believe William Carlos Williams' idea that "poets are damned but they are not blind, they see with the eyes of the angels" (Williams 8). The poet is responsible for showing readers

that different human flaws are embedded in each person and there is no escaping ourselves.

The major drawback with this notion for me was that, in exposing others with language, I would be in danger of revealing pieces of myself. Though my first poems were critiques about the world around me and less directly about me, my fear of nakedness impeded me from sharing my poetry with anyone. I was not able to extinguish this feeling until later, when I admitted that the horrifying images of Catholic ceremony were a message for me to expose what lurks under human flesh—a malevolence that grows stronger even without sunlight.

First, I had to dispossess my unwillingness to reveal my own spitefulness. What led me to this was bearing witness to the unexpected behavior of my father. The man I was once in childish awe of began to shrivel into an abusive, manipulative shred of a man, partly because of this new poetic insight I was developing and partly because he had become a more abusive presence in my life. The once insatiable need for domination in my father's eyes became a reflection of the desperation I had seen in the eyes of the selfish Catholic parishioners.

My father turned out to be exactly what he preached against—liar, abuser, blasphemous, racist—an old-fashioned hypocrite. His duplicity began to eat away my youth, and eventually left me with an old-before-my-time rage and slight paranoia that still has not fully dissipated from my poetry. Owing to the removal of my father's shroud, it became apparent to me that the hideousness

that I formerly associated with Catholicism existed in every human being. The bizarre and the sadistic were not solely properties of religion, but, rather, part of the core of the individual's existence. My new goal as a poet was to make readers uncomfortable, to make them squirm with disgust, and to vividly show that part of what disgusts them about what I have to say is what they see in themselves.

My unchecked rage in observing the grotesque in the people around me became the driving force of my poetry. The lyrical quatrains and couplets of poetry I wrote at thirteen bore no resemblance to the open form of poetry I attempted in my first workshop in college with Austin Hummell. Traditional form was not elastic enough then to carry my individual passion and is still inaccessible for me as the embodiment of my ideas. When writing in free verse, there is still some careful consideration of line and stanza breaks, but I do not feel nearly as constricted in the writing process as I do when attempting to write in meter. There may come a time when I am comfortable enough with language to put it into meter and even rhyme. Although traditional form can be a wall for my words and passion to push against and create more controlled voices in my poems, my poetry does not seem ready to have the words within them manipulated into form.

Although I had written poetry for years, no one was honest enough to let me know how cryptic and abstract my poems were. The possibility of any images was overshadowed by my inability to control the rage that seeped from

my psyche onto the page. Though passionate, my word choices proved to leave pages devoid of terse imagery due to a piling up of clichés, abstractions, and undeveloped, random metaphor.

Challenged by Austin Hummell to pull images from memory and develop them on the page, I chose the one image that haunted me at that time as well as today—the horrific, gruesome image of Christ offering his flesh as sustenance to his selfish followers. After I developed this image on the page, I realized the necessity to move beyond it or my poetry would stagnate.

At the same time I was redefining poetry for myself, I began to see a thematic pattern in what I was writing. Seeing the ugliness within the individuals I was exposing brought about the need to liberate myself from the suffocating hypocrites who surrounded me in school, in church, and at home. Some of these people tried to hold me back from the dark alleys of poetic language, but I knew I had to free myself of their strict ideals and create my own. Though this movement in my poetry began as a personal challenge, it expanded to include the possible enlightenment of an American society that I still believe is consistently being duped by a foolish government. I thought that I could make some difference in this country even if one person was compelled to mull over any of my poems. As in my first poem from this period, “Exodus,” I chose to walk

“through the melted stained glass / window toward the consolation prize,” and that prize was a voice for those who were too afraid to question authority.

Also, paternal issues working their way to the surface forced me to deal with the horrible nature of my father. His beatings of my sisters and me were usually verbal, yet, there were many times I wished for a fist to my face instead of the sting of words. In my poem “English Leather,” a search goes on for any humanity in the character of Daddy but comes to an ominous closure as the child, “squealing at this redneck philosophy,” grows up to retaliate with the violence taught by Daddy.

This fear of not being able to escape from the image of a parent is more closely examined in “Look Away.” The allusion to the biblical relationship of Christ to his own “father” is reevaluated in the first stanza, when the speaker’s name is “spit[ting] out in vain / As if it were Christ’s.” To compound the darkness of Daddy as God, the speaker claims that she is “buying [her] soul from the fallen angel.” The existence of Daddy as God and as Satan complicates the tone of the speaker who is torn on what to believe is the real version of Daddy.

Unlike the reciprocation of violence by the speaker at the end of “English Leather,” the speaker in “Look Away” leaves a sliver of hope that she will eventually find a healthy alternative to verbal or physical abuse when confronting Daddy. Even though the speaker hides, she does not seem to have completely given up on the familiar yet distant self in the mirror. At the close of the poem, the speaker outwardly realizes she is a replica of Daddy, but this image is made

less haunting by the fear in the speaker's face. While the father uses his fists to solve problems, the speaker chooses pacifism over the father's aggression, which seems to be a step for the speaker who is able to admit her own failings and to accept that part of the hideousness of Daddy has been passed on to her. There is the possibility that the speaker will work on transforming herself via the page into a more decent person than Daddy.

There is evidence of the nature of this transformation in the later poem "Hollow Song." In this poem, the tone of the speaker is more sympathetic to the father compared to the earlier poems where anger, bitterness, and fear tend to cloud the speaker's judgments. Also, the father is shown to be very child-like, which evokes an innocence the speaker has yet to reveal about the father up until this point:

He races off, dragging the net
along the river's insides,
thrilled by his underwater kite.
I bend down to inspect the shells,
wonder why I've never seen him so happy.
Maybe his ten-year-old thoughts have taken over.

Since the speaker is able to see the father as the three-dimensional person that he is, there is an emotional transformation in the speaker of "Hollow Song" that is only hinted at in "Look Away."

Oddly, none of my early influences, who taught me to control the passion and emotion, the accusing tone, and the subjects of my poetry, were female writers. And although I later discovered affinities by way of Sylvia Plath's paternal musings, Carolyn Forché's political imagery, and Toni Morrison's empathetic characters, most of my early influences were homosexual men. Since my father was a disappointment to me as a man and as a human being, I subconsciously searched for surrogate fathers who knew the pain and disappointment brought on by other men, and, because they were male, I could still identify them with and compare them to my father.

In addition, what first drew me to poets Walt Whitman, Allen Ginsberg, and Frank O'Hara was their vulnerability and their ability to stand naked on the page. They expose themselves so that readers may be less afraid to do so themselves. As a result, the poets demonstrate that humans are not without the beauty of disfigurement; in other words, the nature of humanity can be gnarled and twisted like an old tree trunk, but there is still much to be admired and learned from someone who has more to offer than normality. In a world where people are consistently banned from their shadow, these men entice the reader to at least check the place out. And if one decides to linger a while, that person may realize both how distinct and how connected one truly is from the rest of the world.

“The quest of life is to become yourself,” according to Nietzsche, and if a person is too busy looking over his or her shoulder wondering what the next person is thinking then the self will not fully emerge. Walt Whitman, however, believed one should “listen to all sides and filter them from your self” (26). Whitman’s “Song of Myself” vibrates with the endless possibilities of the individual’s spirit in this life much in the way the Bible focuses on the possibilities in an afterlife. Whitman is a poet whose work I can return to, and every occasion brings something new to light, even when I believe he has already shouted and whispered everything he possibly could in my ears. Whitman encourages me to “sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world” (76) because my opinion is as important as anyone else’s.

Whitman’s words push me not only to stretch my voice when necessary, but also to retract my voice, when the only return I receive from my poetry is a sense that no one understands my mysteriousness. When the plasticized faces of America show up in my poetry, I do not personally rule myself out as one of these faces in my poems, but sometimes the voice of the poem speaks as if above and separate from the poem’s subjects. I admire Whitman’s use of the speaker as judge as well as the judged in Whitman’s “Song of Myself,” in spite of the sometimes self-obsessed language that accompanies the act of his judging. Because the reader and speaker are both victims of the speaker’s judgments, the poem does not alienate or make the reader feel alone as fingers are pointed. For

example, in stanza 32 of “Song of Myself,” the speaker, looking long at animals, observes many qualities about them that are different from human beings:

They do not sweat and whine about their condition,
They do not lie awake in the dark and weep for their sins,
They do not make me sick discussing their duty to God,
Not one is dissatisfied, not one is demented with the mania of owning
things (51).

The speaker shows in this passage his acceptance of the lowly; animals that, by their very nature, have simple lives can be extraordinary to the speaker because he can find beauty in even the most common beasts.

Similar to the vindication of the lowly in Whitman’s poem, the veteran in my poem, “Visions of a Cheeseburger,” is accepted on some level by the speaker. The “touch” between the two in the last stanza suggests the speaker’s partial understanding of this seemingly simple man’s complexities, including the beauty of the person under the “gnarled / gray beard.” The touch also allows the speaker to forgive herself, even if the absolution is doomed to be short-lived.

The speaker in “Visions of a Cheeseburger” is not able to completely empathize with her surroundings, unlike Whitman, whose poetic sense to become everyone and everything just to understand himself better is the prevalent force in *Leaves of Grass*. In “Song of Myself,” the speaker does not preach repentance; he preaches acceptance. The speaker does not claim the creation of others because he *is* all others:

This is the meal equally set, this the meat for natural hunger,
It is for the wicked just the same as the righteous, I make appointments with all,
I will not have a single person slighted or left away,
The kept-woman, sponger, thief, are hereby invited,
The heavy-lipp'd slave is invited, the venerealee is invited;
There shall be no difference between them and the rest (40).

Whitman consistently punctuates his lines. He needs the reader to slow down, to observe the goings-on in detail, so that perhaps the reader might try to be as invested in his or her life as Whitman once was or at least try to be as accepting as Whitman.

The rather infamous holy man, whose passion for America I still admire, is Allen Ginsberg. Although I did not take from Ginsberg his long breathy Whitmanian line, I did attempt to maneuver my passionate ideas into the free verse of Ginsberg. He also helped me to create my own version of "America" and to feel unashamed to write about the minor skeletons in my closet.

A faint echo of Ginsberg's "America" sneaks into some of my poetry; political invective and sometimes vulgar language are infused with the confusion of where an identity begins and ends within such a naïve melting pot as America.

In his "America," Ginsberg seems to be letting the nation know the only "Russia" that will be wiping out the individual is America. The cold war is fought at home with the self, and one can choose either to be statutorily stapled shut or to put a "queer shoulder to the wheel" (Ginsberg 43). The overall message of "America" is that the only way to avoid being a puppet is to "take off your clothes" (39) and discover the "I" in America.

Ginsberg also opened my eyes to unbeaten paths in page-placement of a poem. In his poem "To Aunt Rose," Ginsberg lends glimpses into the bizarreness of the speaker's aunt whom, at the close of the poem, he encourages to give up her battles with the past and her battle with her deteriorating body:

last time I saw you was the hospital
pale skull protruding under ashen skin
blue veined unconscious girl
in an oxygen tent
the war in Spain has ended long ago
Aunt Rose (353).

Though I did not immediately experiment in my own poetry with the placement of lines on the page, it was beneficial for me to realize such vast possibilities existed in published poetry, since most of the poetry I read as a young adult was in some traditional form.

Though I chose not to emulate Ginsberg's long lines, the energy of these lines interested me because they were so long yet still powerful. Not only are his lines sped up due to a minimal use of articles and punctuation, in "To Aunt Rose," word choices like "pale skull protruding" encourage the reader to read on to see what other unexpected, grotesque images may be ahead. There is also the piling up of terse language, which represents the stacking up of the crosses that Aunt Rose chose to bear in her lifetime. Such terse phrasing enhances the energy of the line by getting the reader through the poem in a short time—perhaps the same short time Aunt Rose has left before death.

Another instance where energetic lines give power to Ginsberg's poetry is in "Howl." This time the lines are speedy because Ginsberg chose to leave out all punctuation, with the exception of apostrophes and dashes, so the reader must depend on the line breaks and their own breaths to eventually pause. The results are lines equivalent to extremely persistent howls. Ginsberg even adds to the howling with the "O's" toward the end of this poem; he forces you to hear the howls at that point even if you don't hear them anywhere else:

I'm with you in Rockland

where we hug and kiss the United States under
our bedsheets the United States that coughs all
night and won't let us sleep

I'm with you in Rockland

where we wake up electrified out of the coma

by our own souls' airplanes roaring over the
roof they've come up to drop angelic bombs the
hospital illuminates itself imaginary walls col-
lapse O skinny legions run outside O starry-
spangled shock of mercy the eternal war is
here O victory forget your underwear we're
free

I'm with you in Rockland

in my dreams you walk dripping from a sea-
journey on the highway across America in tears
to the door of my cottage in the Western night (26).

While I do not always agree with his line breaks or emulate his missing punctuation, the speed of Ginsberg's lines is something to be admired. The non-stop run of words as shown here at the end of "Howl" makes the urgency of the speaker's message all the more apparent. The speaker refuses to stop until everything he has to say has been said.

Along with showing me that I desired my poetry to carry an urgent message, Ginsberg also discourages human horror from completely extinguishing human beauty within my poetry; without Ginsberg, the subtle hope for humankind in my work might not exist. The "crackly bleak and dusty" (36) sunflower in "Sunflower Sutra" would forget that the "golden hairy naked ac- / compliment-bodies" (38) can flourish within a contaminated society. In my

poem “Kobendza Oak,” Ginsberg’s sunflower is transformed into a Polish tree. This oak, like the sunflower, has no choice but to grow amidst monstrous acts and remains from a war that is in part about the acceptance or condemnation of Jews. The Kobendza Oak represents endurance and strength through relentless discrimination.

The brilliance of the common person that is so celebrated in the works of Ginsberg and Whitman exists as well in the works of Frank O’Hara. O’Hara seems to be the epitome of what Walt Whitman encouraged his audience to be—a cultivator of the sublime and grotesque, by way of soaking in all the details around him and filtering those surrounding details to create a picture of his world that the world may not be ready to see. O’Hara shakes his fist at the sky even when he knows the sky will shake its fist in return.

O’Hara brought personal, detailed observation of American life to his poetry, whether he mused upon the deaths of Jackson Pollock and Billie Holiday, the self-destruction of an iconic society, or the effects of a dangerously Catholic upbringing. He loved the flesh, the speed of life, the salt of concrete, the smother of canvas, and the snag of any moment, every moment. O’Hara’s self-proclaimed unacademic word choices are energized by his spontaneous observation of America.

O'Hara's poem, "Ave Maria," was a crucial poem for me to encounter. Not only is the poem ignited by the satirically religious title, but the poem also houses a mixture of naïve and worldly tone and diction that lends a lighthearted wit to the serious warning of the poem. "It's true that fresh air is good for the body / but what about the soul / that grows in darkness, embossed by silvery images?" O'Hara begins this excerpt by sounding like a public service announcement—quite generic and matter-of-fact; however, his worrying about the soul is not the typical religious repentance for redemption in the afterlife but a plea to the "Mothers of America" to stop prematurely burying the souls of their children and instead to let those souls lurk in shadow with "silvery images." To forbid these souls their shadow is to condemn their imaginations.

I seem to have always lurked in the shade, at least, but did not discover the "darker joys" that exist in shadow until I was an adult. I can hear the child within myself throughout "Ave Maria;" the speaker's child-like tone mixed with a final statement of adult bitterness at the poem's closing offers a glimpse as to what lurks in the speaker's shadow:

and they'll have been truly entertained either way

instead of hanging around the yard

or up in their room

hating you

prematurely since you won't have done anything horribly mean yet

except keep them from the darker joys

it's unforgivable the latter
so don't blame me if you won't take this advice
and the family breaks up
and your children grow old and blind in front of a TV set
seeing
movies you wouldn't let them see when they were young (372).

The accusatory tone is emphasized by the speaker who points a finger at “you” specifically, and shows the reader that the speaker knows what it means to “grow old and blind if front of a TV set.” And “movies” exemplify all art that allows anyone to have a unique experience even if the work of art has previously been encountered. Even in this poem, which I have read many times, I still find the urgency in the speaker’s voice and the shadow of the speaker change as I change emotionally.

On the other hand, in O’Hara’s poem “A Step Away from Them,” the way the speaker sees New York City seems to change through the handling of the details of the speaker’s surroundings. The poet’s quest for making all things important, even if they seem trivial is illuminated in this poem. He does this by enjambling, for instance, the fourth and fifth lines, “where laborers feed their dirty / glistening torsos sandwiches” (*CP* 257). Just as few would expect joys to be darker in “Ave Maria,” few would expect to follow the word dirty with glistening in “A Step Away from Them.” A sensual image is created from the mundane

hardhat donning construction workers, who may have dirty mouths, but they do not use their mouths for eating; they use their glistening torsos.

Meeting and making some sense of the morbid and sadistic individual within ourselves is the only way to move forward in our development as human beings; otherwise, life is stagnated in an infantile phase of discrimination and condemnation. If a heterosexual man is too frightened to think a homosexual thought, a Christian too close-minded to watch Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ*, and a young girl too ashamed to admit that she masturbates, then America has larger problems than foreign invasion. If individualism ceases, there will be no more poets, painters, musicians, or thinkers. An America without transgressive individualistic thought would shame the ancestors who founded this nation.

I cannot begin to tap into a fraction of what Ginsberg, Whitman, and O'Hara have accomplished and continue to accomplish with their poetry. But I have found "the devil in me who is me" by taking Whitman's advice and inhaling my milieu, reaching for more than the immediate, and filtering through all that I gathered to find myself. All I can strive for now is a constantly mutating me and an endless polishing of the stones that others will throw.

Bibliography

- Ginsberg, Allen. *Howl and Other Poems*. San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1956.
- Ginsberg, Allen. *Collected Poems: 1947-1980*. New York: Perennial Library, 1988.
- O'Hara, Frank. *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara*. Ed. Donald Allen. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995.
- Stevens, Wallace. "Adagia." *Opus Posthumous*. 1957. Ed. Milton J. Bates. New York: Vintage Books, 1989.
- Whitman, Walt. *Leaves of Grass*. New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 1993.
- Williams, William Carlos. "Introduction: Howl for Carl Solomon". *Howl and Other Poems*. By Allen Ginsberg. San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1956. 7-8.

PART II
COLLECTION OF POEMS

ONE

I've Looked upon the *Naked Man with Knife*
(ca. 1938-41, Pollock)

I've looked upon mattresses of the dead—
those lingering canvases that display
the oily stains of the body.

I've felt the curves and arcs
once clashing from a painter's hand,
like Pollock's motionless *Naked Man*,
looking like a paused murder scene—
red from the corner of some god's mouth.

The naked man is too elusive to show
where his dagger has been, where it might plunge next.
He flashes calves, forearms, his dull gray blade;
I can never see him all at once.

When I have convinced myself that his violence is an act of self-defense
(or maybe some other forgivable crime),
something floats in his eyes like scum on stagnant water.
How clearly I see him, the body parts of others
that had to crawl, part by part, just to be eternally poised.

Souvenir

I was thirteen when I saw your photograph
in my uncle's study: he told me
you should have been mounted on the wall,
his taxidermist's masterpiece.
He settled for a small snapshot of you
swallowed by an oversized wooden frame, his war medals.
I got close enough to see your dark wooden skin
before he pulled me away from my confusion.

Then he said you were sleeping,
and your dirty clothes stretched,
reattached over every hole—
a peasant boy's uniform.

Later I realized it wasn't your shirt that was dirty.
Your body was limp, flat on the ground.
If you had been barefoot,
your feet might have seen
what eyes could not:
maybe carried you in a different direction,
away from the vibration of cheap wire.
I saw through you.

Before you could complete your mission,
before your arm swung behind your head
to release the homemade bomb
from your shaking hand, I wasn't born.
I couldn't take your empty hand and run
while green camouflage chased us with guns.
So the grass, gleaming, appeared
where your little boy stomach should have been.

I still see you sometimes
in the background of TV news reports.
You look strangely fierce with eyes open,
staring through my wholeness.

Hollow Song

I keep my eyes closed as we cross,
still I imagine meatless skulls as underwater
garden pots, human ribcages as fish prisons.
My father told me my head was filled
with fiction, and fishing might mend me,
but I dread the drive over the bridge.
Though, for a few minutes, it keeps me safe
from bones of men who couldn't make a living anymore,
men who threw their bodies from this bridge.
I wonder if in the seconds they flew,
they saw signs of incurable disease:
the rusted refineries pockmarking Texas flatlands,
the crumbling docks eating the river
with mangled teeth, the thin
iridescent pools staining the water's surface.

Our car reaches the top of the bridge.
My father drives slower, points to buildings
where fifty years of soot sealed generations' lungs.
I still hear whistling through the workers'
caked nostrils, accompanying the rhythm
of a hollow song once played by dwarfed Eiffel Towers
pounding the ground for black gold.

Approaching the bridge's base,
I remember how my father told me
about all the black lava that greased men's
eyes. They couldn't see arthritic factories
crowding together, their steel backs to the town
in shame, their distillation pipes no longer
singing for earth's black geysers.

My father pulls the car over, switches it off.
He tells me to listen: the city's frustration
crackles like paper scraps under the wind's weight.
He leads me to the river's edge,
offers me handfuls of powdery shell.
The calm water ripples suddenly
where my father dips his fishnet into the murk.
He says he needs to show me
that his hometown is not dead.
He races off, dragging the net

along the river's insides,
thrilled by his underwater kite.
I bend down to inspect the shells,
wonder why I've never seen him so happy.
Maybe his ten-year-old thoughts have taken over.
He runs back to bring me his catch—
a blur of gold scales, red gills thrashing in his net.
He grins like it's his first fish, and I wonder if he
saved it from its ribbed cage. As my father comes
back into his face, the golden flounder
gasps deeply, searching for the dirty water
where it began.

For Emphasis

I watched you disintegrate slowly like a cigarette,
or a body in a culvert.
Nicotine and tobacco the vital distraction.

To see yourself lying
in shallow water,
gray eyes shriveling,
scared you into tyranny.
Later you confused your four pretty pinks
for cadavers—
how you looked at us;
formaldehyde crept through our veins.

We ran through sprinklers in our skivvies,
soaked to the bone we were
spindly little girls wanting only to feel
the weight.
Cigarettes we confiscated,
rolled “daddy don’t” notes into a pack—
but they are the only things you ever loved
enough not to let go.

The Condition

~After Mark Strand's "The Prediction"

That day the noon drifted over the room,
turning the sick to sicker, and under
the blanket of the girl, the blue girl,
a young life walked, and for a moment

the vision came to her:

light falling on her mother's face, light falling
on the palms of her hands, her own throat
filling with cold prayer, time moving into her ghost,

a fan in her ceiling writing a song, the noon drifting into *Hummm*
a kitten strolling under its parent, thinking of fullness,
thinking of food thinking of warmth, and the sun rising,
taking the noon and leaving the eyes dark.

TWO

Shattered Ceramic

Stashed in the darkness of my closet,
the ceramic jester's glazed red eyes still drip
with the blindness of my grandmother's
tiny paintbrush. I hoped to black out her
attempt at a magnum opus, but I hear faint

heckling in my head when I remember
her in-home workouts clad only in nude
hosiery and strained bra, the bald rooster

lying limp across her cutting board post-
slaughter and her arms full of purple
chicken scratches. I imagine violet jester mouth
curling into a smirk at the pick she placed
in her frizzy hair and forgot; she cannot

remember when anyone was born or the awful
painted clown she gave me around my 23rd
birthday; she *can* remember exactly how

everyone dies and to check her level of blood
sugar. And she knows about the sweet wrinkles
that ooze down her sun-forgotten features
like sweaty clown face; they force me to take hammer
against the vulgar plaster of her ageless casing.

12 Whitmans

Absorbed in a clear plastic cube
containing the last few blades of grass
(shellacked for sheen)
I search for you, Whitman.

But it is Warhol I find, silk-screening
shades of Walt onto a thick pink-
coated canvas; twelve whiskered
mugs of a seventy year old
do not obscure the saturated
contemplation of 24 oracles
peeking out from the pink—
minus a few where Andy's roller
inks some of your eyes closed.

I emerge from the synthetic cube,
your image fixed as a fire hydrant
(so many relieved dogs thank you)
in my memory.

I bolt your final slab of grass
into the asphalt museum,
where it waits to be discovered by a nation
that blinds itself with its polished glare.

Kobendza Oak

~In the Kampinoska Forest, outside of Warsaw, Poland,
the Kobendza Oak has borne witness to many wars, uprisings,
and battles, spanning the last 400 years.

Blood Kobendza—

Polish oak too deep-rooted to fear chainsaw-wielding monkeys,
autumns that strip its colorful clothing,
and the ominous odor of naked lumberyards.
Metallic suppositories do not shudder loose its boughs.
Years marched by in salute, blue bodies crumpled,
while thick Jewish crimson cocoons the earth,
dissolving only the weakest roots under blood slicks;
this great oak shirks its ancient oak leaves,
shuns man's wrinkled brow
full of determination
not to understand.

Coffee Can Worms

My feet and hands were planted
in the shadows of a flowerbed,
busy trying to revive a gray-brown bud.

At first, I thought the young flower died
because of my perennial black thumb,
but then remembered myself at eight—
digging in the soft earth for bait worms,
squealing if I happened to touch a writhing body;
within an hour, I had a worm graveyard
in my closed Folgers can and a head-sized
hole in the ground.

I remembered the sounds from the hole:
distant, begging chants, wrapping phlegm around my name.
My mother told me about earth's purgatorial layer
where tortured souls beg for forgiveness,
squirming in masses together like coffee can worms.

I shriveled a little in God's shadow that day,
hydrating the cracked voices from the hole,
and now, as I remake my flowers' bed,
I am the worm that aerates the packed earth,
munching new paths through dry, tasteless dirt.

Superfly

In the afterbirth of terror
the rabble hunts for new nourishment.
~Ingeborg Bachmann from "Psalm"

Fondling rights of cultures
with bulging multi-faceted eyes,
visual field wickedly fractured
by omni-directional I's.

Visions: hideous mustached one-eyed giants,
uncertainties, resurrected
monsters crawling out of desert desecration.

Where there is only one, for the fly
there is a multitude of crawlers sliding
silently in an oil pool.

Slight movement, panic in spastic
form, like someone who sleeps on crates
of dynamite and wakes to a boom,
leprosy of brain matter muddles.

Visions: illusive multitudes suffer
first from life-threatening regurgitations,
then, eradication.

A plague of consistent purging,
as mangled as bubonic face.
You were meant to bully the blue
Arabian sky with nefarious
wing beatings.

English Leather

Dangling from a crooked nail
on the smoke-yellow wall,
the long leathering strap
that smells like his English Leather
waits,
while Daddy threatens with his Ten Commandments.
(There were more than ten...I counted them.)

He reaches for the strap.
On its way to meet flesh, its silver buckle winks.
The cowboy is still riding on his adrenaline
and I am the calf thrashing the ground,
squealing at this redneck philosophy.
His words are not enough
to break a child.

Restrained calves quietly turn to bullish rage,
and the cowboy, broken by hooves and horns,
will be left with the smell of dirt,
blood, and English Leather.

In Your House

The greatest purveyor of violence
on earth is my own government.
~Martin Luther King Jr., April 4, 1967

Although your plumage has been plucked,
you keep the feathers in your Pale Crown,
mocking savage sorts still scalped by metal blades,
legislative bullets. You conjure their uncivilized customs
for your own, find new Indians to evaporate
with chemistry solutions because you've learned
nothing from a people who are called red;
their faces match the ground on which we grovel,
painted a rust color by fear
resting in white hands,
not quite ages ago.

The "gung-ho" from under your flagging blanky
is not equivalent to their nature rituals inside
pueblos, teepees, but still you try, cry like a baby
in your waking from a milkless dream.
How different the fetal position is from men
placed in fatal positions.

Look Away

Bellowing down the hall,
Daddy calls my full name
spitting it out in vain
as if it was Christ's.

He knows I am leaving his lair,
buying my soul from the fallen angel.
In his final attempt to sway me,
he peels back my head
by a fistful of hair.
I can't hear any words
over his loud, hot breath,
but still his crooked mouth moves.

Before I close my eyes,
white of his tight fist draws closer.
I wish I could run but my knees are numb.
I don't even feel my face explode red
against his hand.

After waking, I stare at my protective
device. He cannot harm me again.
Still, he is there in the mirror.
Minus the scar in the corner of my right eye,
Daddy stares back at me,
with the worry of nightmares
in his face.

THREE

Sins Revisited

She broke your new radio,
shattered it on the basement floor,
the cord an invisible trip wire.
To avoid the glare that made her
one inch tall, she thought
she might hide the pieces.
Instead she decided to plead with tears
that you screamed back into her eyes.

That little girl didn't know that you knew
microchips and wiring better than people
and secretly enjoyed broken items—
that tedious transformation
from parts to a whole.

Later she learned you were good at everything
almost, her unexpected Jesus,
bringing the dead to life, like the house
that appeared from a packed mound of dirt.

Secretly she called you “snake charmer”
and from a ladder top was your audience
for the electrical light show. Carefully,
never noticing her there, you routed
each wire across the house's unfinished walls.
She noted your purse of mouth,
the concentrated lines on your forehead,
the strands of tight wires.
Her favorite part was the shucking of plastic
ends to reveal innards of shiny copper.

You were busy in trenches that you were
too old for or too young for to notice.
Always another government conspiracy,
more voices telling you to take aim against
enemies in the house you built with empty hands.

And even though you've avoided her for years,
she knows that your favorite Chapin song is broken
in your head, and that shock treatment and Jesus
can't save your skinned wiring.

Red Exposure

the torn wires hanging, like veins
And arteries: waiting for their time.
~Yehuda Amichai

I wait for the time when the bluest vein will be exposed,
one that bulges from the soft underside of my arm,
trying to burst from my body,
shimmy up the footholds of a mountain.

Mundane, this wanting to dye paper
the way a bitter burgundy wine stains
everything.

I'm tired of harboring these channels
drumming.

The bluest vein must rip into the world
unsightly as a womb.
Page after page.
Otherwise, the internal valves spew wreckage,
bequeath to my paper
unemployment.

Visions of a Cheeseburger

America put good kids through a meat grinder
and now microwaved meat patties line streets,
their moldy burns flake off each day
they crawl out of Saigon
or slink through miles of desert.

they are still fighting—

He held a cardboard sign for a Cheeseburger,
the pack on his back suffered from black holes.
I could make out a smirk behind the gnarled
gray beard.
No teeth glinted in the sun,
but his eyes flashed
me.
In his nakedness
I saw his ex-wife,
his daughter with MS,
One knee.

I watched myself,
white velvet hands
squeezing the steering wheel
until my nails broke the skin of my palms.

At the stop light,
through my open window
a rough hand reached.
My shoulder tingled, touched.
As he backed onto the median,
he flipped over his sign
“God Bless America”:
the light turned
Green.

Hovering
~For Alex

That indestructible ring
makes you forget your musings
on disembodied heads in car windows.

To erase her from your life
would return you to yours,
but her depression medication numbs you
less than the memory of solitary time.

When you should have left
you forgot the combination to your safe,
where you keep you.
Then you gave into writing about love,
making sure she kept pills coming.

Hasn't settling for shoes you wanted in a smaller size
made you realize love doesn't hover?
It seeps into every cell
into overactive lungs, black hearts;
it crawls undetected into the bloodstream
where valves readily open
to let love breathe for you.

Sugar blues

Little sister—
the only one
is everyone with a cock
and a mouth that oozes
sugar-coated decay.

I beg your postpartum blues
but you've always been this way—
bleating for a daddy
who sheared off body parts to find
small sons that we never were.

If anyone asks,
it doesn't hurt.

Your name is scrawled
on some bathroom wall
next to the cure for loneliness.
I've tried to convince you otherwise,
but you think of only the black marker's
permanence.

Dammed

spring out of the fairy tale you wrote,
the one we're sick of hearing
~Anna Akhmatova

*This is a predictable fairy tale—
I already know what I am saying.*

*The words pour from my tongue like water
escaping from a dammed river.*

So a man dies awkwardly for burden.
A burden cries awkwardly for man.
A man's cry weighs uncomfortably upon me.

I saw my father cry once,
not for his freshly broken paternal link,
but for silent suicide of his language.

Daddies die everyday knowing their sin:
words never flowed from their mouths the way they flew
from hands.

He might as well drop-kick himself in the heart
because language leaves him
loveless. (Not mothers, wives.)

Dammed water,
Breeding grounds for blood-suckers and bitter offspring.

Pawning Your Game
~After Borges' "Chess"

I feel like a pasty whore on the corner
of God's chessboard
pushed so close to the edge,
waiting for permission to breathe.

If my move is already chosen,
do I have to spread
what little of me exists for what
little of Him I know so well?

God tries to make his move
but I don't care to protect
royal courts or their causes—
these are just plastic kings, queens, knights,
no one is ruthless and faint-hearted
except He who has just moved the bishop,
and who checks my grip on the game
by childishy swiping the board
to the depths of floor.

I no longer have to hold my breath;
there was never sin, no dark competitor
for Him to master. The lone player remains,
blindness is burned in His back.

FOUR

Hungry Ghost

~According to Buddhist beliefs, preta or hungry ghost is the realm of those who, after death, are still so attached by desire to this world that they are ghosts.

I fell asleep and my body went missing.
The room rotated, mocking the earth's passing hours.
No flesh encased me, and I began to wonder
if I was imagining, as I did as a child,
my body becoming one with the bed in my stillness.

The room's spinning slowed, two bodies rested on our bed.
There was you, and there was she—permanent, still,
much more becoming than death's rotting scowl.
Just as I moved close enough to almost recognize
this woman lying next to you, dense moss and weeds
sprouted through and around the bone china body.
Only her feet were bare of growth.

I noticed my scar on her right ankle,
even as that foot began to rot;
maggots were born from the blackened heel
as I floated safely above the body.

I wanted to crawl into your breathing,
tell you that the woman next to you was the memory of me,
but you didn't want to listen or know how to hear
whispering from some purgatorial realm:
your unstable dreams with still thoughts of me
could no longer rattle your sleep if you unshackled
my decaying body from your mind.

Not knowing how else to get to you,
I picked one maggot from hundreds
squirming next to you on the bed,
lay perfectly still to become the small creature,
gorged on your memories, let go.

The Tunnel

~After *Akira Kurosawa's Dreams*

With faces painted ash-green, the slain battalion's march
echoes behind you, officer, waiting for their next order;
they've crossed the lightless tunnel and stand at its mouth
to find your shocked face, drained like Hiroshima.

You release their salutes: their homes are uninhabitable,
unless they want to haunt mothers who bore them into battle,
their bodies are no longer victims of gravity, but molecules
floating in mushroom clouds, and their souls are reincarnated
into the world of beasts: now,

canines track your scent (the stale stench of nothing) and wait
on either side of the tunnel; you cannot calm snarls or extinguish
red lanterns around their necks because red is the only certain color
on your canvas, and even if the barking never stops, you cannot
let the dream dogs leave.

Exodus

Your dead Hebrews' numb words
assaulted my ears, distracting me from zombie-like
zealots who forced my cracked tongue onto envelope
to seal my own ransom. They wrapped my brain
tight with dirty woven blankets—shrouding.

You forgot to use the money to save me,
I was suffocating, so one scratch at a time,
I clawed through my confines. Now shredded,
your fuzzy face floats on every piece of cloth,
like the single dollar Mona-Lisa-man,
crumpling at the path I've taken through stained
glass windows toward the consolation prize:
to lock lying lips with unholy wax,
straight-jacket your full Mass.

Ashes

Swimming between parted seas and burning bushes,
I sent letters to David Bowie,
but my mail-ordered message bottle
was never returned—only electric and gas fees
lined the black box.

My mamma said to get things done
I better not argue with The King of Thorns—
one prick might make me bleed,
hear purgatorial voices;

those desperate specks of reduced life
sandpapered my brain into polished pink marble
and sifted into the remains of my conscience.

But He slid off my slick pink psyche,
and the devil in me who is me
burns all bushes,
dances with David in the moonlight,
while the world wonders which of us is a drag.

Blur

Saline enters us,
stinging the pink of our ocular cavities.
His fingers are cold through the latex,
we cannot focus, rubber is the last thing we feel
before gusts of air pry open our veined drapes.

Twitched gently under
red laser-pointer allure—
nuisance of light, bore through our tenderness
like a child's finger burrows into a bruise,
He finished and we flinched back our white slabs,
delicately deflecting unawareness with the velvet
fluidity of heavy lids.

Near-sightedness is no longer our disease.

Guinea Pig

Being born is like being kidnapped.
And then sold into slavery.
~William Shakespeare

Newspapers rub off opinions
you think later when I see you
reading black smudges on your fingertips.
Without knowing, you've ink stamped
your forehead with what looks like a bruise
but is a lowercase "t". It reminds you:
think later, and whisperings in your ear
immediately become original
reflection.

Your bad knees unbend from the floor,
not because you know how to orally
stimulate, but because your mouth
must receive a stranger's body.
His blood trickles down your throat,
but spiked with just enough hemlock to keep
nerves numb, he's played a cruel joke;
you can't even taste your cannibalism.

No one has the antidote,
but if the hemlock hasn't completely taken
what's left of your mind that's his,
I'll show up at your mortgaged piece,
administer slap therapy everyday,
or you could sign up to win a lifetime
of question marks.

First Born

I destroyed white baby dolls.

I mangled those vacant blinking eyes
so they no longer made me feel lonely.
They were always watching
wide-eyed, ruined.

Sweet Delilahs with one-armed scissors
that plunged from my sensible adolescence.

Resurfacing from the selfish hours, the darkness that inhales
red, yellow, orange aura from submissive sister skies,
I was struck by a sudden trajectory of white doll fists
fighting for what was left of them.
Tomorrow is as rigidly brief as it is jagged;
my obligatory ambush,
the sharp edge of the next day's light.

Fight Pattern

My fight-or-flight region sliced
in an open laboratory,
the procedure overseen by brassless Mr. Clean,
who was long ago devoured by bug-eyed profits
—can't go over budget—
negative numbers make the straw man fidget
as if he's the ex-CEO of Enron.

Fiscal earnings ooze from my incisions,
washed with toilet water into the bank
at the Ninth Circle. He looks on warily
as his assistant, who reeks of brain rot
from years of desertion, sloppily stitches
closed their precise failure:

drill and scalpel couldn't liberate
me from myself and I fight
glazed sterility in my subconscious,
block out gross numbers,
void the receipt for my soul.

Eve's Transference

On France's southern coast, the sea slid gracefully
over smooth stones toward my bare toes.
Unexpected warmth of its liquid hem
teased my skin, but I could not oblige
its lust for my darker recesses until I submerged
my hesitation. I then waded into foreign bacteria
and unwittingly swallowed the briny brew.

That night, I shivered in the moon's muted blue.
Through an open window in a stranger's villa,
the leafless woman was delivered;
her delicate cerulean body glowed
like a halo around the head of an apostle or a Christ.
The sin that brimmed her eyes was not
mentioned in the Genesis beaded in my mind.

She glided toward my achy body on the bed—
stale lavender drifted,
reminding me of the hibernating
God whose will I swallowed once—
She offered me her closed palm.
Slowly, her slender fingers bloomed
bearing no visible fruit,
but fruit I could taste
if I searched long enough.