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Count the rings

By

Kayla Kensey Pearce

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of
Mississippi State University
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts
in English
in the Department of English

Mississippi State, Mississippi

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Count the rings

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Though Sandra Beasley is not generally considered a feminist poet, many of her poems in *I Was the Jukebox* contain feminist undertones. This critical introduction takes into consideration the implications of these feminist undertones and examines Beasley's cultural critique of masculinity, violence, and how the two are occasionally interchangeable. Because Beasley uses mythic personae to make these cultural critiques, her poems often work to subvert literary norms and patriarchal narratives. Similar to the way Beasley interrogates masculinity, I use a feminist perspective to interrogate both masculinity as perceived from my own lived experiences as well as my heritage as a Southerner.

DEDICATION

To Mississippi, for hurting me into poetry.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to thank my mother for giving me the means and encouragement to follow my dreams, for the sleepless nights you've spent worried about my assignments, and for thinking I am a worthy investment. But mostly, for being my mother, my biggest support system, and my best friend. I would also like to thank the Creative Writing department at Mississippi State University—Catherine Pierce, Michael Kardos, Becky Hagenston, and Richard Lyons. I am eternally grateful for everything you've taught me about writing and, subsequently, about myself.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

War and Love in Sandra Beasley's *I Was the Jukebox*

In *I Was the Jukebox*, Sandra Beasley exemplifies T.S. Eliot's escape from personality as she employs mythic personae to critique the relationship between socially conditioned masculinity and its depiction of love. She accomplishes this by situating herself within the historical context of specific wars and militaristic violence and through a series of love poems addressed to abstractions in which she deconstructs the history of love poetry. While Beasley removes the human beloved expected in the tradition of courtly love poetry, the feminist agenda in this regard is probably incidental to some or all of her manipulation of love poetry in general. In Sonnet 130, William Shakespeare more deliberately rejects the conventional literary exuberance of his fellow sonneteers as he restores humanity to his beloved. Popular courtly-love practices would dissect women and compare them, piece-by-piece, to the beauty of the landscape and/or various classical goddesses. The figurative dismemberment of women within the blazon trope ridiculously idealizes women, objectifying them and falsely elevating them based on superficial notations of beauty and charm. Shakespeare's sonnet responds to this traditional approach by refusing clichés and granting his beloved her imperfections, thus celebrating her genuine personhood: "And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare / As any she belied with false compare" (13-14). Beasley has chosen a more indirect approach against

chauvinistic clichés as she subverts traditional literary norms and patriarchal narratives as well by allowing her mythic personae to act as a cultural critic and to avoid a readership afraid to grant confessional women writers like Sylvia Plath, Ann Sexton, and Sharon Olds credence as feminists who sometimes employ the intimate details of their autobiographies.

Beasley subverts male militarism and glorification of war in “Cast of Thousands” by removing the veneer of distance. In the poem, she imagines herself into an American war movie, and at minute ninety-seven, the roof of her home collapses while she is baking an apple pie—a representation of womanhood ideal to America. This shatters the symbol of the all-American woman as the picture-perfect homemaker is immediately and violently altered. Beasley quite literally turns the death of the speaker into a performance so that she can fictively manipulate the normative atrocity foisted upon her:

My death is the clip they send to the Academy;
later they will kill me in Spanish, then French.
I will die on mute, on airplanes, row after row
of my tiny, touchscreened dying. (10-13)

The touchscreen acts as a protective barrier between the viewer and the war, and her death is naturalized as a result when she joins the cast of thousands—a commodity—becoming “useful [to] anyone who advances the story / then drops away” (18-19). The poem also comments on the deep-rooted effects of passive participation in war culture as the viewer of the film begins to dream of her:

In your dream
six months from now I’ll make my cameo

as the customer with an unfocused smile,
offering a twenty as the register
begins to shake and smolder under your hands. (19-22)

In removing the protective barrier and placing herself within the viewer's dream, Beasley destabilizes the trance-like effect of the dream. This makes the viewer participate in the violent acts of the war as she invades the security of the dream space. However, inside her lampoon, the cameo becomes a cartoon super-woman version of herself:

They buried my village a house at a time,
unable to sort a body holding from a body held,
and in minute ninety-six you can see me raise
my arms as if to keep the sky from falling. (26-29)

In the beginning of the poem, the speaker dies at minute ninety-seven, but in returning to the image of her at minute ninety-six, she also defies the linear timeline of the events: everything from the movie to the death to the dream.

Another poem in which Beasley interrogates militarism and masculinity is "The World War Speaks." In this poem, Beasley personifies both World War I and a fictive infant Adolf Hitler in order to present the formative practices that indoctrinate children to accept violence as a natural and cultural norm. The poem juxtaposes images of innocence with violent and eerie connotations of warfare: "When I was born, two incisors / had already come through the gum" (1-2). The incisors of this child, the teeth in the front of the mouth used for cutting and tearing, illustrate the idea violence was inevitable. Of course, the child in the poem is a product of his environment:

Every morning my mother boiled

a huge vat of mustard greens,
steam drifting over to my crib and
after a few hours, souring into a gas.
I breathed it all in. (6-10)

Mustard gas, which was first used in World War I by the Germans, is one of the first chemical agents of warfare. Steam treatments were and sometimes still are used to cure illnesses; however, in the poem the repetitive steam treatments are used to accelerate the lethal gestation period of the speaker. As the speaker grows strong from the presence of the lethal gas, he inhales and absorbs it to become lethal as well. In the midst of growth and preparation, the speaker presents aggression as a perverted state of readiness:

I learned to dig a deeper kind of ditch.
I learned to start a fire in three minutes.
I learned to sharpen a pencil into
a bayonet. (14-17)

In the formation of a makeshift bayonet, the initial purpose of protection and self-preservation evolve into an impending attack at the hands of the speaker. In preparation of the attack on his neighbors, the child invades their private home:

Sometimes at night
I'd sneak into the house of our neighbors,
into the hall outside their bedroom,
and watch as they moved over each
other like slow, moonlit fish. (17-21)

As the speaker sneaks into the intimate quarters of the neighbors and commits voyeurism, he violates their boundaries with invasive maneuvers. This act of invasive surveillance is exacerbated by the context of their sexual encounter, though the speaker notes that the parents of the child stopped short of sexual encounters:

Sometimes my mother would comb
my father's hair with her fingertips,
but that was it. They wanted an only
child: the child to end all children. (22-25)

The act of the mother grooming the father's hair mimics the way the parents have groomed the child and prepared it for violence. The last line of the poem is a play on the phrase "the war to end all wars," a term mostly used in a disparaging way after World War II, which echoes the false idealism the parents project onto the child. This allusion creates dramatic irony within the poem and parodies the implied historical context—the audience is well aware of the outcome of the child and the subsequent war, both of which are a product of the speaker's hubris as is seen in the last line.

Like the invasiveness of the child's surveillance, "The Sand Speaks" is another of Beasley's persona poems that considers invasiveness. Here, she examines the corrosive sand as a representation of male omnivorousness and fertility: "I am fluid and omnivorous, the casual / kiss. I'll knock up your oysters" (1-2). Beasley echoes how boundless and ever-present sand is throughout the poem:

Mothers, brush me from the hands

of your children. Lovers, shake me

from the cuffs of your pants. Draw
a line, make it my mouth. (8-11)

By personifying the sand in such a way, she gives it agency and an unrelenting presence. This presence and agency shift from being a mild frustration to being an ominous threat when the poem turns at the fifth stanza. In the opening line of the poem, the sand introduces itself as “fluid and omnivorous.” This line foreshadows sinister and chilling moves that happen at this turn: “Let’s play Hide and Go Drown. Let’s play / Pearls for His Eyes” (13-14). Line 13 is a reference to the child’s game “hide and go seek;” line 14 is a reference to a scene in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* in which the spirit Ariel addresses Ferdinand upon the news of his father’s death: “Full fathom five thy father lies. / Of his bones are coral made. / Those are pearls that were his eyes” (1.2.396-98). The speaker creates a question of gamesmanship with a sinister air, calling up both Shakespeare’s play and Eliot’s use of the eye imagery in *The Waste Land*. Both references to death set up the ominous tone of invasive and corrosive agent that continues for the rest of the poem:

There are always more men, men

who bring bags big enough to hold
each other. A man who knees down
with a smaller bag, cups and pours, cups
and pours, as if I could prove anything. (16-20)

The sand acts as invasive and corrosive agent as it permeates boundaries throughout the poem, incessant in its lingering presence.

Masculinity continues to permeate the physical and the subconscious in “Antietam,” which both deconstructs male stoicism while commenting on its internalization. The poem is a narrative about a time when the speaker visited Antietam National Battlefield in Maryland. The poem opens with images of child-like innocence only to be later disrupted by acts of masculine violence:

We all went in a yellow school bus,
on a Tuesday. We sang the whole way up.
We tried to picture the bodies stacked three deep
on either side of the zigzag fence.
We tried to picture 23,000 of anything. (1-5)

The speaker ruminates over the lack of perspective the children have as they are unable to grasp the weight of what they are witnessing. Beasley then shrinks the scale from the macro to the micro: “Our guide said that sometimes, the land still let go / of fragments from the war—a gold button, a bullet, / a tooth migrating to the surface. We searched around” (10-12). These smaller objects represent the microcosm of militarism, which led to the Civil War, giving the battlefield a human quality (of decomposition) the children can better intellectually and physically grasp. The resurfacing of the objects acts as a rebirthing of violence. The ancient artifacts are pushed from the land and into the hands of a younger generation.

The poem shifts from male violence as an abstract idea to a concrete one at line 13: “On the way back to the bus a boy tripped me and I fell— / skidding hard along the ground, gravel lodging / in the skin of my palms. I cried the whole way home” (13-15). This transition functions in two separate ways. First, the boy tripping the speaker

highlights and condemns the juvenile brutality of the boy. Second, it gives the speaker a reason to express her grief as she processes what she has just witnessed. As a child, she is unable to fully comprehend the scale of the battlefield or of the Civil War itself.

Unfortunately the lesson the field trip is trying to teach the other children is lost on their innocence as they “asked about fireworks,” making light of the experience (9).

Despite the children’s inability to fully understand their experience, the speaker walks away with a deeper understanding once the boy physically harms her:

After a week, the rocks were gone.
My mother said our bodies can digest anything,
but that’s a lie. Sometimes, at night, I feel
the battlefield moving inside of me. (16-19)

As her wounds heal, she speculates whether or not she wants to digest what she has witnessed and internalize the violent act committed against her. She projects the horror of the knowledge she has gained from the field trip onto the situation with the boy in order to compartmentalize and better process the macrocosm of masculine violence. The rocks are a symbol of the experience and the poem, in turn, reflects upon the speaker’s loss of innocence. The violent act of the boy is a synecdoche for the larger pattern of learned masculine violence. The fact that the violence occurs on a battlefield speaks to the cyclical nature of masculine violence. In telling the speaker to “digest” what has happened to her, the mother shows that she has internalized masculine violence, and this perpetuates and continues the cycle of violence.

In “The Minotaur Speaks,” Beasley presents maternal love as an act of sacrifice in order to subvert male heroism as she embodies the Minotaur to rewrite this

myth making its victim a sympathetic character. According to the myth, Minos, King of Crete, prayed to Poseidon for a bull to slay as a sacrifice to the deity, but instead of slaying it, he kept it for himself as a symbol of his vanity. Poseidon then put a spell on the King's wife that made her fall in love with the beast and have a wooden cow constructed so that she could climb into it and mate with the beast:

The queen lay in the hollow
of a wooden cow so my father
would mount her, his white hide
glistening like a raw moon.

To love is to look up, up, up. (1-5)

Similar to the King, the Queen is overtaken by the beauty of the white bull and she is drawn to him like the tide. As a result of the spell cast onto the Queen, she looks “up, up, up” towards the moon in a hypnotic trance of male bestiality and mates with the bull against her own free will. Once the Queen bears the child from this assault, she sacrifices herself to provide for her child:

My mother
gave me the apple of her breast,
and I bit it off. To love is to feed
and feed again. (12-15)

Maternal love, then, becomes an act of self-erasure. The child siphons from the mother's resources, and she allows him to do so as penance for her betrayal to the King despite the fact that his vanity is what ultimately led to the birth of the beast. The apple of

her breast also alludes to the Biblical tale of Adam and Eve. Her son, the Minotaur, is the product of a sin committed against the King

However, Theseus, the son of the King of Athens, volunteers to slay the Minotaur to stop the annual and ceremonial sacrifice of seven young men and seven young women. He is so beloved by those around him that Minos' daughter, Ariadne, falls in love with him and gives him thread so that he may navigate his way through the labyrinth where the Minotaur lives. According to the myth, this leads to the Minotaur's slaughter. The use of Theseus as the archetypal hero has made him a popular protagonist in the retelling of the myth while the Minotaur has often been cast as the antagonist. In Beasley's reversal of the roles, she turns the Minotaur into the sympathetic character. In anthropomorphizing the Minotaur and giving him a voice, she gives him agency, though the Minotaur himself does not realize this until the end of the poem. Because of his isolation and a life being treated as a product of sin, the Minotaur is full of self-loathing:

My room
has thirty-two walls, no doors,
no chair, no light, no mirror.
I touch a face that is leather
and horns and mine, mine, mine. (15-19)

His room is not a room but a cage, and his face is a metaphor for the mental anguish he lives in. Although he knows Theseus has been sent to kill him in order to bolster his status as a hero, the beast still challenges him:

They say
my death will make him

a hero. Everyone loves a hero,
but a hero only loves you
until he reaches the next island.
This is my only island. To love
is to unwind the long thread
of your heart and, at the end, tie
a noose. Love, come and get me. (22-30)

The Minotaur recognizes the fact that he is nothing more than a thing to be conquered to Theseus. Although he is half man and half beast, Theseus removes all personhood from the Minotaur and reduces his identity to a commodity and domination on which to capitalize his public status. The Minotaur undercuts Theseus' act of male valor by sacrificing himself. He takes the "thread of [his] heart," a token of love in the myth, and ties it into a noose, a symbol of suicide. By taking his own life, the Minotaur removes the power of destructive force from Theseus and ultimately claims agency by ending his life on his terms as opposed to being slaughtered.

The myth of the Minotaur is an example of a classical myth Beasley rewrites, but she also interrogates the myth of the American college experience in "Love Poem for College" as she deconstructs the idea of love as a transformative, all-consuming phenomenon. She accomplishes this by scrutinizing love through the lens of the traditional American college experience, focusing on the way it intoxicates and alters one's perception: "You pour gallons of lightning punch / into a trash bag, promising that sobriety / is just a 2 A.M. Waffle House away" (2-4). This love, however, is deceptive and boastful, mocking the chronic insobriety in fraternity's norm of valuing intoxication

over education: “Your blackboards are suspiciously green. You pop your collar. You roll your skirt” (8-9). Here, the co-eds buy into the ritualized mating dance of intoxication leading to fornication. At the poem’s turn, the speaker looks back on love more clearly as if sobering up out of a drunken state:

Later

we will all wonder if you were
the best of us, but you were probably
just the most frantic. We swarmed
like fireflies in our jar before someone
lifted the lid off. We pierced the sky
with our panting, involuntary light. (18-24)

In the end, the speaker wonders if the intoxicating love was an authentic love, but she concludes that the intoxicating love the poem speaks of is ephemeral like the fleeting light of the fireflies. Additionally, the fireflies depict fleeting youth as the lid is lifted from the jar, exposing the students to the practical world as opposed to the academic world.

In “Love Poem for Oxidation,” Beasley fixates on transformative love as a corrosive agent. Oxidation is defined as “loss or removal of hydrogen from a compound”; therefore, “Love Poem for Oxidation” speaks to the after effects and glorification of the loss of the transformative love (“oxidation” *OED*). The poem meditates on the painful loss of this love and comments on the damaging effect: “You are the sunburn / where there is no sun” (10-11). The pain of a sunburn is representative of the pain of lost love felt in its absence. The poem reiterates the loss through the end:

Romeo, if you think I am losing it,
of course I am losing it. This is all about
the losing of it.

...

[...] *Be mine*, says the skeleton, flashing
a smile that could seduce flesh from bone. (14-16, 19-20)

The pun created between lines 14 and 16 resonates with the idea of losing—losing love or losing hydrogen to create oxidation. The poem becomes aware of itself as it addresses Romeo, explaining that this (the poem) “is all about / the losing of it.” In the conclusion of the poem, the idea of transformative love as a seduction is ironically paired with an image portraying the flaying of flesh. The poem exposes what is beneath the surface of transformative love as it is often glorified in different forms of entertainment like the commercial version of Romeo and Juliet. The transformative love, the poem recognizes, quickly becomes a corrosive love.

In “Love Poem to Los Angeles,” Beasley shifts from the love of another to the love of self as she undercuts the patriarchal American dream with sarcastic commentary on the shallow and false veneer of vanity:

You
are our strangest echo, the promise of Great American
Self-Storage. Los Angeles, I love your red-and-white
strip joints, your car dealerships, your Bob Hope Hall
of Patriotism. (2-6)

The emptiness of the self-storage and the red-and-white strip joint both represent the distorted facade of the type of love glorified in Hollywood: the “Great American Self-Storage” illustrates hollow American values on outward appearance and empty core; the red-and-white strip joints depict male coming-of-age patriarchal ritual; and the Bob Hope Hall of Patriotism references false allegiances to public figures. This love, however, is not only shallow but also combative: “[T]his constant haze as if a battle just / ended and your bloodied asking *Did we win? Did we win?*” (8-9). The poem asserts that this love is unhealthy and destructive as it examines miscommunications and a dismissal of boundaries:

Two hundred years ago, we set out west one
oath at a time, a long game of Telephone.

...

When I tell you I am married, all you say is *I do*.

When I say *Don't get hurt* you hear *Flirt harder*. (1-2, 17-18)

In the well-known game of Telephone, messages are often lost in translation and miscommunication. The end message rarely resembles the original message—the intent is lost along the way. Beasley bookends the poem with two miscommunications: first, the game of Telephone echoes sentiments of Americanized love of advancement and possession as seen in westward expansion. Second, the speaker notes that this love is fleeting and hollow: “[T]hough I know you dream of living forever, cancer / looks good on you” (13-14). This love, similar to the intoxicating and corrosive love seen in the two previously mentioned poems, is consuming as it absorbs at the male possessor who is unaware of his participation in courtly love’s twisted role as the slave of love. The female

speaker then refuses the role of the sovereign woman, as sovereignty, for her, requires autonomy and self-respect.

In her essay “The Laugh of the Medusa,” Hélène Cixous asserts that a “woman must put herself into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement (320). Beasley accomplishes this in *I Was the Jukebox* as she gives a voice to the voiceless, reframes traditional narratives, and destabilizes norms. In order to accomplish these feats, she rewrites myths, places herself within historical frameworks, and personifies the inanimate, giving the subject agency. While her poetry examines time-honored patriarchal themes of love and war, Beasley manages to subvert normal narratives in *I Was the Jukebox* in order to offer an alternative feminist narrative.

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CHAPTER II

POEMS

My Father as a Redwood Tree

At eighty feet tall, you are the runt
of your family. Resistant to pest or prey,

your only enemy is Mother Nature:
a cleansing fire, a tantrum wind. I visited

you at seven, carved my name into your spine,
and expected myself to bleed. I wanted to amputate

myself from you, to cauterize you from my veins.
My mother says if we leave you alone, you can live

for six hundred years. Once, I dreamt she found the chainsaw
beneath my bed, the teeth rusted together

like your tangle of roots, a stitch in our fabric
I cannot unweave. Years later, I returned

to find you'd been harvested, plucked
from the earth like a feather. Some days

I pull pickled bark from my throat. Some days
I cut myself in half just to count the rings.

Say Mississippi

Say Mississippi.
Say Tunica.
Say you're given
the winning
Roulette number
moments before
the ball settles,
and then the casino floods.

Say you teach your children
to sing my name:
you whisper
my humpbacks,
my crooked letters
into their shoelaces,
the soles of their feet.

Say you're a tree:
a magnolia
or maybe the Friendship Oak
where a man once hanged
on your limb
for nineteen days
on account of his being.
Say your roots
are tinted red.

On Yearning

after Terrance Hayes after Lorca

I want to always
unzip your veins
with my vermouth
tongue. I never want
to be a thrust of fists
into your gingham coat.
I want to learn the weight
sleepless nights, pressing
against the backs of my eyes.

I want to be smaller
than a whisper
in the crook
of your neck.
I want a mouthful
of Chiclets
and sugar-rushed
jitters. If the full
moon can summon
insanity, I want to be
your white-knuckled
dopamine and the fall
thereafter.

I want to fight
the Rubik's Cube
of your mouth
in 40 years and gift
you words from my lips
when aphasia weighs
your tongue into stasis.

I want to pour kerosene
on this town, Darling,
and slow dance with you
in the blazed wreckage.
And when the sirens
reach us, I want them
to find nothing
but wind.

Combustibility

When I asked my older brother what makes the crackle
when fire meets wood, he didn't explain how gas escapes

and pops in oxygen. Instead, he said, "Exploding bugs."
That summer, I was seven, pockmarked, and a nuisance.

One day, he took me to a field of cattails and handed me a knife,
said he'd heard of a college in Tennessee that studied bodies: their melt,

their swarm of maggots, time marked by an ungrassed patch.
When we found the cattle corpse, I wanted to push the flopped-out tongue

back in the mouth. I wanted to go home. I wanted to unhinge time.
I handed back the knife, the warm steel too heavy. He fished a lighter

from his pocket and knelt beside the cow's swollen belly:
"Watch this." Then, he drove the blade between two ribs,

cocked the lighter, and set fire to the heart of me
as the escaping gas glowed hot and blue in the summer sun.

Staccato

after "Liftoff" by Michael Kardos

The day I turned fourteen,
Space Shuttle Columbia
disintegrated upon re-entry
somewhere over Texas.
I was in a broom closet
in Mississippi, tucked
between Robert Adams
and a bag of kickballs.
Their rubber scent clogged
the air as he unfolded
from his salty tongue
words like *fuck* and *cunt*.
They tasted stale and acrid
as he kissed me,
inched his hand up my torso,
gasped when he found
me woman enough.
And somewhere over Texas,
the sky was falling.

Mississippi Soil

I was sure the armadillo was asleep.
Its shell, husked out by a coyote
and trailed down the blacktop, coiled
into a bowling ball-sized roly poly.
I wondered: if I hold it in my hands,
will it unbuckle its gridlocked shell
for me like a cat convexing its spine.
That summer, we buried my grandfather,
and I saw him cinched into a fit of rigidity
too. I saw him slacken eventually,
stretching his limbs with a shudder,
preparing for sleep, soaking into the soil
on top of black bodies, on top of red.

My Father as the Berlin Wall

From a distance, he could have been a levee:
a canvas for delinquents holding back

the dreadful deluge. If he had been a monument,
he would have stood for miscalculation: a collection

of architectural flaws, or maybe a blueprint
for succumbing to addiction, a palimpsest

of my genetic code. How long he must have fought
against the crux, steel rods reinforcing him from the core.

Someone told me a man in West Germany
still sells chunks of him, fist-size slabs

of a history I can never recover for fifteen
euros apiece. I was ten months old when they tore

him down. My mother tells me I was just learning
to walk then, testing the tensile strength of my legs

when I fell and split my lip, blood crusting at the corners.

“Salute to Police Officer Doyle: Champion of Elephants”

—*Headline, Circus Watch News, 1992*

Consider the red of it and the white—the sting of dung
in your nostrils. Consider the pachyderm,

six deep in a Conga line led by the matriarch.
Imagine the neon air she dances beneath

as she balances on a ball, then bows.
Picture, then, the surge when she breaks

from her levee.
Show me how to bottle a hurricane,

and I’ll show you how the world ends:
fifty-seven armor-piercing bullets

and a policeman, slumped into the grass,
crying into his hands, gunpowdered fresh.

Higher Stakes

after Sandra Beasley

I dreamt we played Monopoly.
You were the racecar and I was the thimble
because I long to mend broken things: your Frankensteined

wrist watches, flat tire smile, jagged nail beds.
You sped around me, stalled in jail seven times,
and choked me in your fumes.

Someone once told me that Illinois Avenue
is the hottest spot on the board. So I put a Hilton
on it—filled the bar with Jose and Jack, hoping

to seduce you with my Billie Holiday vibrato
and foie gras. But you asked for pizza. For Budweiser.
For Alice in Chains. I held the dice in my hand and thumbed

their dimpled plains. I shook them seven times for luck,
and then you took me for all I had.

Meditation on History During Pee Wee Soccer

At halftime, my sister stabs
boxes of juice with straws

for each of the sixteen players.
They're the yellow team this year,

too young to be Vikings or Conquistadors,
Trojans or Gladiators. They've not yet

learned to conquer. Behind us,
her middle son chases a girl

and his machine gun laugh rattles
across the field. He snatches

lightning bugs and smears
the phosphorescent war paint

across his face. Later, I'll wonder
if we had any chance at all.

New Orleans, 2010

At the Old Absinthe House, the freckle-faced waitress
pours green liquor over a sugar cube. The syrup melts
onto a flat leaf-etched absinthe spoon and into the glass below.
My date laughs his barrel chested laugh when she sets
the whole thing on fire, wave after wave of blue heat rolling
in the tumbler. He looks too young here, slack-jawed
with fascination. Through the dim light, I see the wall
of business cards behind him, a kitsch of the Absinthe House
so travelers can immortalize themselves. Up to my eyes,
they're brown and wrinkled from the weeks of waterlog.
When she finishes, he sips it, pulls his face to the side,
and shivers. I watch his eyes ooze in and out of focus.
But the absinthe isn't absinthe; it's herbsaint. Simulacrum,
imitation. When we go to leave, he tries to kiss me
with his licorice tongue. His body weight pressed against the wall
for support, he lunges forward and stumbles when I move.
I turn away from his emerald breath and tell him goodnight.
I begin to walk home, and somewhere in the back of my throat,
I feel the dogs howling with hunger at a moon that's no longer there.

My Mother in the Lions' Den

When they threw her
into the den, she clutched
for red clay wall.
Her back concaved against
the sloped ceiling
like a question mark.
She did not cry out for release.
My mother never meant
for belly roars, for dripping fangs.
White robes shucked
at the gate, she had no shield,
no shelter. She had a single vestige
of prayer as she knelt beneath
a menagerie of tiny upward tunnels,
pitted from fingernails
of the desperate, the wild,
the clawing who came before.

Different Gods

You should know
the funeral homes
in my hometown
are still segregated,
present day. When I was
young, I asked
my mother why—
if our bodies
decomposed
differently. If we
prayed to
different Gods.
The black funeral home
is neighbor
to a fire station.
You should know:
at night,
I used to imagine the sirens
waking the dead,
masking their screams.

The Photo Journalist Speaks

after the photograph by Bahareh Bisheh

The outline was chalked
into Iraqi pavement—
a 5-foot stick figure.
A long dress. Hijab
knotted at the throat.
The small artist had to crawl
on her knees to draw it,
rocks brailled into her
skin. I asked her who
the woman was, and she told
me it was her mother
as she gave her a bouquet
of purple chalk flowers.
I asked if she'd like to draw
flowers on her mother's dress,
too. Instead, she crawled
inside the outline
and curled her body
into a hard ball on top
of her mother's empty
womb. I looked around
the walled-in play-
ground and noticed her 14
classmates, each drawing
a stick figure of their own.

Family Portrait

The corner reads '93, but the edges
are over-exposed and hazy. Here,
I am four, my sister six. The background
glows red and green and cinnamon.
We are sitting in her pink Barbie car
on Christmas morning. On the other side
of the camera, my mother is ripe
with pregnancy—my younger brother
will be born in two months
during the worst ice storm
Memphis has ever seen. After he died,
my mother lurched into shadows:
darkness does not know its own shape.
For years, she broke mirror after mirror
trying to climb into a world where
he hit the car instead.

Mulligan

1.

When I was ten, I woke
to a stinging winter morning
and florescent orange.
My mom didn't want me to go,
but my dad wore her down
with talk of tradition
and the men in our family.
He often told the story of skinning
his first buck at age six.
When I was six, I think he was fucking his secretary,
but my mom never said anything.

Tradition.

2.

By the time we got to the buck stand,
he was trigger-happy for me.
He'd look down at me, shake his head a little,
and smile as he said, "Your first buck."
But I hadn't even shot the thing yet
and it felt like I never would.
We'd been there in the stand for over an hour
when the sun started coming up.

3.

I was nodding off, my gun between my legs,
when my dad kicked me awake
with his thick rubber boot. I saw the white tail flittering
between the trees and my stomach grew hard and cold.
I righted myself and placed the barrel on the wall of the stand.

Steady.

Breathe.

Squeeze.

4.

Everything tasted orange.

5.

A few weeks before, my friends and I
were shooting pool on the new table
my mom liked to call Dad's Midlife Crisis.
I spread my fingers over the emerald felt
and steadied myself for my next shot

when my dad walked in. He stood in the corner,
casting shadows on shadows,
and watched. I exhaled and shot.
The cue ball bounced across the table
and I clenched my stomach.
I moved to fetch the ball and try again.
“No,” he said. “No Mulligans.”

6.
I hit the buck on my first shot.
My dad *whoop*-ed and threw
his gloved fists in the air
like I’d won the World Series.
We walked over to the body,
but the body was still a buck.
I’d missed the heart and hit him behind his ribs.
It was enough to take him down,
but not enough to kill him.
I asked my dad what to do.
He told me I was a man now
and I had to figure it out
for myself. I reached for my gun,
but my hands were like phantom limbs
and refused to grip.
He took the rifle away,
told me I was too shaky.

7.
I didn’t think to ask for his knife.
I dug my heels into the ground,
pulled the body to the shallow creek
about a foot away,
and held the snout under water
until it stopped kicking.
My dad walked over,
brushed his finger across the wound,
and painted the blood
in a small t across my forehead.

Tradition.

8.
We tied the buck to the roof of the car
and drove home. The whole way there,
the bouncing hooves matched
the lurching, knocking beat

on the door of my heart.

Isis Speaks

after Sandra Beasley

The Nile is as long as many
ropes, Osiris, and I have frayed

each one in search of you. I combed
the teeth of crocodiles for your clavicle,

their bellies for your ulna, their claws
for tufts of your hair, and I did not find

you. They said my boat would never
survive the passage, but this papyrus

makes fish swim backwards, serpents
hide in the mud. They hear my battle cry—

the lazy drum of my heart—and know
that I still look for you. At night, I wrap

my fist around the moon and swallow
it whole. It rolls in my belly

like a fish in a net, and I spit
it back into the sky thirteen times

and call it mine. You are mine, Osiris,
and my heart is an empty sarcophagus,

waiting for you.

The Blitz

When I arrived at the nursing home,
they told me he'd had the dream again:
beds with cat-tongue-rough army blankets,
bug-eyed gas masks telling him, *stop shaking—*

be a man. A porcelain bathtub where his baby sister
would sleep. All empty. In this dream, the Luftwaffe
grinds, roars, and dives into London darkness.
The basement smells of plaster and urine.

His family huddles in a mass in the dark corner:
younger brother hugging his father's trunk,
mother singing hymns while his sister's lungs
try to drown out the sirens. At dawn, smoke crawls

through the half-hinged doorjamb and down
the splintered planks, which his father ascends
in two leaps. He believes his mother when she promises,
the fire will make the Germans think they've already got us.

I thought I smelled smoke one day after the tornado
sirens put his mind back in that basement again.
I always promise him that he's safe,
but every day, I still check his room for matches.

At the Bodega

1.

When the lady taps on my car window,
the first thing I notice about her
isn't her baggy t-shirt with grease
stains across the chest or her two-inch
brown roots running toward her red
strands like an enclosing forest fire.
It's the little boy in a red and green
striped sweater, the same pig nose as her,
staring at us from two cars down. He's barely
big enough to peek through the sedan's window,
dirty hands supporting his weight on either side
of his face. She follows my gaze and he must
see something in hers because he lunges
out of the car, trash, clothes, a life
spilling out from the passenger side.

2.

His sweater reminds me of Freddy Krueger,
and I remember that my wife is waiting
for me at home with a b-side horror flick
and a craving for ice cream. The problem
is that I don't *know* what ice cream
is her favorite, and I can't *admit that* to her
even if she wasn't chock-full of child.
So I drove three blocks down, two up,
and now I sit in the parking lot beside the bodega
with the window cracked a little. I roll it down,
and the lady's breath hangs in front of her
like exhaust from my tailpipe.

3.

I'm pulling out my wallet, displaying my "No cash,"
my alleged broke-ness, and then I'm the little boy
in the red and green striped sweater. Except
it's not a sweater, it's a blue Power Rangers tank top.
And it's not winter, it's July. And I *don't*
have a pregnant wife at home, I have a pregnant
mother who is driving me and my older sister up to Memphis
to see Aunt Dee and abate the summer heat in her pool.

4.

So we're swimming, my sister and me,
trying to keep away from the vacuum monster—
a monster I made up to scare her, but I must
have forgotten that I made it up because when it brushes
against my legs, I hold my breath, ready to disappear.
Instead of dying, I swim to the ledge, climb out,
and pull the monster from its lair because dad
always told me to protect my mom, my sisters.
Then I see my mother inside, framed by the bay
window, crying into a wad of white tissue with luggage
at her feet, and Aunt Dee is carrying my Power Rangers
bag inside, but I don't remember packing it
because Mom said we were just coming over for a swim.
I run inside—*you never run by a pool*—and ask her
if dad is coming to stay with Aunt Dee too.

5.

I close my wallet and tell the lady to get the kid
and come inside. She's holding one hand over
the steam of her fresh coffee, and the kid is grabbing
candy hand over fist. I snag a coat big enough
for him to grow into, pull some money from the ATM,
and stick it in the coat pocket. When I get home,
my wife asks me where her ice cream is, and the only thing
I can manage to say is, "I was mugged."

Hatchling

When my younger brother presented
me with the squawking, writhing hatchling,
I told him it was tainted with his human scent.
He'd found it while climbing the pink-budding
crepe myrtle in our backyard, racing our sister
to find the prized Easter egg. He cradled the nest
between our mother's pink gardening gloves
and asked me to help him wash it, but I didn't
know how to tell him it was too late.
After I sent him inside, I killed the bird
and buried it beneath the crepe myrtle. Months later,
the dog dug it up and presented it to me—a gift—
to remind me of what I had done. Some days,
I can still feel the bones cracking in my hands.

The Mattress Speaks

They fell in love here. My spine bent
beneath the weight of them,
fingers crisscrossed above my skull.
He said *I love you* the night they spilled

red wine on my hip, and he asked her to marry him
on the second Friday of October. Four months later,
she soaked me in more red when she lost the baby
in the middle of the night, middle of winter,

middle of my back. She did not leave me
for days, weeks, months. She flipped
me in August; he left in September. She sold me
to a lady whose bones creaked more than mine

when she sank her body between my vertebrae.
She lay on my tailbone for days, so I poked
her back with coiled carpals to wake her. She moaned,
but did not move. She took her last breath
on me—where things go to die.

The Art of Baking

The day before my eighth Thanksgiving, my grandmother taught me the art of peach hand pies: the cut of cold butter into flour, fuzz of peach skin against my knife, slimy egg brushed onto the unbaked half moons. I mimicked her tilt of the whisk, her puree of the peaches. She held my hand to help me crimp the edges, and I imagined the fork puncturing her paper-thin skin. When she left me to watch the baking pies, I drifted to the sink where the turkey thawed. I touched the bird—massaged it—skin sliding over muscle, and saw my grandmother in the sink, plucked bare and ready for roast. Her skin was the bird's skin, soft and roving. I wanted to cover her, to find her feathers and unpluck them from her awful breasts, her horrible translucent skin. Then, I smelled charred sugar. I ran, hid from the funneling smoke, and covered my ears, protection from the smoke detector's piercing howl.

The Minotaur's Mother

after Sandra Beasley

He was conceived from a mixture
of love and wood chips. His father
had the strength of seven men—
as many as it took to slay him.
But my son takes seven men
and seven maidens each year
in a banquet of sacrifice. I open
my windows on the night
of his feasting, their cries echoing
in my ribs. Now, the man with flaxen
hair is coming to put my son's head
on a spike. If he is lucky, the death
will come quickly. If I am lucky,
even quicker. One cannot pay penance
for an eternity. As a child,
I gave my son the apple of my breast,
and he took all of me. Even still, my heart
is a labyrinth only he can navigate.

The Many Deaths of Morgan Freeman

When I think of the last time I died,
I remember the way the asphalt peppered
my skin as I laid down 562 pounds
of Harley on my left leg.
I still feel the way the knees
of the red headed lady
were pressed against my hips
as we coasted down the plains
of the Mississippi Delta
just moments before I chose
the blistering black highway
over a dog in the road.

But the first time I died,
I was young and green
and desperate for the attention
of pretty young things
that were eager to give it to me
because of the fatigues I wore.
You didn't have stalkers back then—
just ladies like Lorna
that didn't get the message
because their boys were pulling triggers
in a jungle and they needed a cold drink
and a warm body.
She threw her whiskey sour
in my face a few times,
and I had pebbles of glass
in my passenger seat
after the whistle of a crowbar
sliced the night air.
Then there was the casual nick of an artery
when she cornered me behind a bar
and turned my fatigues rust red
when I told her "No thank you, ma'am."

But that was back then—
back when I had a too-long life
ahead of me, when I had Maggie,
a patch-balding mutt I found
in the middle of the highway.
The same damn mutt
that chased birds

like she could fly away with them,
and never understood
when enough was enough.

Love Letter to Walter White

after Marcus Wicker

Dear Walter: We need to talk.
Where did you go wrong?
Was it the greed, the thrill of it,
the need for control over?
You want what you're told
you cannot have. They say
Shoot for the moon, and you dance
on Mars. I admire you because you turned
your ship around just to set it on fire.
And Walter, I love you because it's so easy
to hate you, and I, too, am a contrarian.
There is no guidebook to loving a criminal,
a villain, a *but I did it for the right reasons*
kind of guy. That doesn't mean I can't love you
because my ship is heavy and soaked in kerosene.

Target Practice

Lying on your stomach,
you watch the amputation
of Mark Hamill, listen
to the wail,
and think of your father
in the next room, packing
bullets for his McMillan TAC-50.
You suspect
the next day he'll slink his body
through the shadowed house
and pepper a hill
on your grandfather's farm
while the rising sun
warms his neck.
In a few years, he will take you
to the farm, hand you a gun
and, you will shoot the Coke can
clear from the fence. He'll smile
and everything will taste orange.
When he mouths
something to the wind,
you'll look at your hand
that will one day be
the same size as his.

Love is a Magician

who carries
a counterfeit Russian accent
in his mouth. You are his lovely
assistant with a cinched red dress.
He tells you he loves you in red
as he kisses the smooth valley
above your collarbone. He calls you
Grace Kelly, so you chameleon
into her under the spotlight—
all dignity, royalty, and shackles.
He asks you to solve a Rubik's
Cube blindfolded, but your hands
are suddenly oven mitts. Seal flaps.
Missing. He leaves you on stage,
flailing in front of a crowd while
he steps out back for a smoke.
When he returns, he puts you
in a box and asks to saw you in half.
You close your eyes and hold
your breath. To love is to trust.