

Spring 5-17-2013

Still Life Moving Fast

Kelly Jones

University of New Orleans, calling.kelly.jones@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uno.edu/td>



Part of the [Poetry Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Jones, Kelly, "Still Life Moving Fast" (2013). *University of New Orleans Theses and Dissertations*. 1639.
<https://scholarworks.uno.edu/td/1639>

This Thesis-Restricted is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been brought to you by ScholarWorks@UNO with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this Thesis-Restricted in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/or on the work itself.

This Thesis-Restricted has been accepted for inclusion in University of New Orleans Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UNO. For more information, please contact scholarworks@uno.edu.

Still Life Moving Fast

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Film, Theatre, and Communication Arts,
Creative Writing
Poetry

by

Kelly A. Jones

B.A. Antioch University Seattle, 2008

May 2013

Copyright 2013, Kelly Jones

Acknowledgments

Kurt Vonnegut has said that “The arts are not a way to make a living. They are a very human way of making life more bearable.” He said this when explaining why if someone wants to hurt their parents they should become a writer. I find this to be funny and true. True because parents will always wonder how their writer children are getting by and because they will probably also always wonder what their writer children are writing about them. I suppose that last part applies to all the relatives and to the friends, too. Therefore, I’d like to thank a handful of people. First off, Ted Morée, thanks for being okay with most anything and for reading more poems than you ever wanted to. Mom, Tracy, Ray, and Oscar, I want to thank you all for being supportive of me doing this crazy thing.

As for friends, there are too many of you I should be thanking. In brief, thanks go out to Bri, Sabrina, and Kimber, for being around all these years and lending an ear whenever I call you complaining about my life choices. Alex Reiser, thank you for reading so much of my stuff, and for your insight. I like that we “get” each other. Mary Bamburg, thanks go out to you as well for reading above and beyond what academic attachments required you to. All of my workshop friends, thanks to you as well for your input over the years. I’m going to miss our Wednesday nights together.

Many thanks go out to my thesis director Carolyn Hembree. It was a pleasure working with you, thank you for all the time and attention you gave me these last nine months or so. To my other committee members, Kay Murphy and John Gery, thank you for your participation on this, I’m glad to have worked with you both over the past few years and am thankful to have had your eyes on this manuscript as it came together. Gratitude also goes out to the CWW and those that keep it going.

I’d also like to thank ArtFarm Nebraska for providing me with a space where many of these poems came to be, and Vermont Studio Center for giving me a calm spot to retreat to and work on a new project this summer. And to the various journals that have supported my work over the years, my thanks go out to you as well.

Table of Contents

Preface..... 1

I

The Sponge Museum in Tarpon Springs 8

Sirens like Music..... 9

Butterflies: A Poem That Isn't Really About Butterflies..... 10

Pull the Blinds..... 11

My Father's Dad Used to Say All Days End the Same 12

The Borrowed Beach House 13

Weeki Wachee 14

The Road Kill..... 15

A Simple Malformation 16

2,100 Miles without a Map 17

Seacow 18

Daddy Longlegs of the Evening - Hope!..... 19

Living Still Life..... 20

The Disintegration of the Persistence of Memory 21

II

Something About Borders..... 23

The Long Street All-stars..... 24

To Save, Press 9..... 25

Figs..... 26

Avocados..... 27

For Shearon Harris Nuclear Power Plant..... 28

For Dorothea Dix Mental Institution 29

For Falls Lake 30

Skank Hour 31

Forever Is for Fools..... 33

There's an Art to This 34

For Belltown 35

III

Hook Will Bring You Back 37

We Can Crow..... 38

More than Zero 39

Whiskey and an Apology..... 40

My Brain Makes Sense Like This..... 41

Good Luck 42

The Trigger Effect..... 43

We're Wireless..... 44

Under the Sea..... 45

Vita..... 46

Preface

If someone told me ten years ago that I would one day write a preface for an M.F.A. thesis, I would have laughed or at least rolled my eyes. At eighteen I was juggling a full load of courses at Wake Tech Community College with a sixty-hour work week in the service industry. On my one day off, I often read Charles Bukowski poolside (while nursing a hangover with a warm beer); on other nights, I read Robert Frost and other more traditional poets for my American Literature class the next morning. Occasionally, I scrawled a poem on a bar napkin or penciled one into a glittery notebook I kept in my glove box. Ten years ago, I was struggling to prove that I could “do college,” something no one in my immediate family had achieved. I tried to convince myself to study something practical or to pick a career path that would be reliable, but poetry always prevailed.

For as long as I can remember reading, I read poems. I can still recite lines from Shel Silverstein’s poems. “Listen to the mustn’ts, child / Listen to the don’ts” and other verses were engrained into my memory at a young age. These childhood poems eventually led to Maya Angelou, Edgar Allen Poe, and Langston Hughes. In high school an enthusiastic young teacher, Ms. Flowers, introduced me to the standard variety of English and American poets: Shakespeare’s sonnets, the famous suicidal women (Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton taught together, their unhappy ends always emphasized), writers from the Harlem Renaissance and the Beats. That is when I began to realize that poetry had power: that it went beyond fun sounds, nice end rhymes, and metrical lines. Poems were a way for people to connect, share stories, describe events and images, and, in my young idealist mind, create a discourse that can bring about change.

I love poetry's ability to condense an idea or experience into a small and stirring thing. Langston Hughes' "Dream Boogie" impacts me even now; more than a dozen years after I first read it, I am still impressed by how it expresses an emotion so well, with such memorable rhythm and phrasing. I often remember a line of a poem or a certain image more than I do a poet or poem; a little phrase often becomes a haunting memory, working its way into my mind so that it comes back to me over the years. When I talk crap with friends about the booming Bywater, I complain about the "angelheaded hipsters," a reference to Ginsberg that surprisingly few people get. Leaving a bar or a party, I'll say, "let us go then, you and I," expecting whoever I'm with to respond with "when the evening is spread out against the sky / like a patient etherized upon a table." When that doesn't happen, I'm disappointed. When I'm at a protest, I joke that maybe I should go home and write a happy poem because Giovanni's "For Saundra" makes that statement painfully ironic.

After finishing my Associates degree, I traveled abroad on a poetry scholarship; when I got back, I decided to finish my prolonged undergraduate studies. So, I moved to Seattle to attend Antioch University, which allowed me to study exactly what I wanted to: literature and social justice. I lucked out and got hired at The Hugo House, a literary nonprofit named after Richard Hugo. I am thankful for the benefits this experience brought. Through planning events and working the front desk, I learned a lot about how a successful writer, such as Sherman Alexie, gets his work out to others (by giving readings, touring, and engaging with literary communities mostly). I also witnessed people working hard to become writers. While working there I met middle-aged pilots polishing their first novels and women only a few years older than I was who had kids and wrote poems late at night. I began to see how writing could be worked into average lives, which gave me confidence to pursue my own writing.

While working there, I began to read Hugo's essays and became smitten with some of his ideas on writing. In the essay "The Triggering Town," Hugo makes a distinction between public and private poet: "most good poets of the last century or so have been private poets." If I had to lump myself into one of those categories, I think I'd call myself a private poet, not because I think I'm a "good poet," but because I write to process events of my life. For a private poet, Hugo explains, the goal is to be "honest and to try not to be too boring." He goes on to encourage private poets to follow their obsessions and to hone them, which is what I have tried to do while putting together this manuscript. Rather than avoid what I privately obsess about, I have tackled these topics. Death, dreams, and gender-issues appear in many of the poems in this collection, and though these are concerns that float around in the public sphere, they are internalized and dealt with in a very private way. Part of my process for dealing with these ideas and experiences is to write about them, which is a private act. Putting that on display is very public, making the private open to others. At times, this sort of writing seems to be a dirty, manipulative thing. I'm torn between feeling guilty for writing about dead friends or lovers and feeling relief in letting part of them go. Adam doesn't have a voice anymore, and who am I to give him one or tell his story? What if Lance doesn't want an elegy? What if he just wants to be let alone, forgotten? But their stories are also mine, and all I can do as a writer is try to be true to the experience and the emotion behind it, to do what Hugo suggests: be honest and not bore my reader.

This fall I split my creative efforts between working on my thesis and participating in a modern dance piece for the New Orleans Fringe Festival. The Fringe dance piece consisted of a female chorus that opened and closed the show. Between these sections the choreographer performed an improvised solo in the buff as we remained on stage. During the performance, both dancers and audience confronted bodies and ideas of ownership, autonomy, and being put on

display. Months of dance had an unexpected effect on my writing. While dancing I had to consider presentation and fragmentation. I also began to question how parts could change, and due to this new sort of inquiry, I began to revise my poems in more drastic ways. Some poems' ends became their beginnings. "We Can Crow" is a poem I had considered mostly done when beginning work on my thesis, but it has been flipped around completely from its original form. Other poems were reshaped and relined, such as "Figs," "Avocados," and "To Save, Press 9." Much like the experience of building the dance piece, parts of these poems were isolated or exaggerated in order to place more attention on certain images or ideas present in the poems. Collaborating on the dance required me to view my body and how I moved it as part of a larger whole. As a side effect of that I began to think of words in a similar way and I began to grow more comfortable with shifting them and working them differently.

Unlike dance, which attracts me due to its physical demands and beauty, my interest in poetry is firmly rooted in the idea of shared experience and social change. I often focus my writing on locations, events, and relationships. Poetry is the simplest way for me to reinterpret my experience or envision a different world. I have a stack of read and half-read books by contemporary female poets on my desk right now. Many of these books could be called feminist texts, I believe, because they explore issues of sex, bodies, violence and perception. The first poem in *The Cold War*, by Kathleen Ossip, introduces a speaker who recounts, sarcastically apologetic, her masturbation: "Labia ablaze, I tugged and tugged at my clitoris. Needed / to make sense of an utterly empty vessel. *Sorry*. But needed to." If a friend told me that, I'd call it an overshare. As a writer I appreciate the poem's frankness. The italicized "sorry" followed by the short, repetitive explanation, makes her apology seem forced, false. Another book, Emily Kendal Frey's *The Grief Performance*, has a cover that blows me away. There is a woman sitting in a

teacup that is full of red liquid. Her back is to the viewer. The cup is cracked. And there is a large knife stabbing into the table the teacup rests upon. Before I began reading, I knew the book would speak to feminist concerns, which it does by focusing on the loss felt by one woman. The poems in Frey's book are subtle; the cover is not. Her work and the work of other women writing in similar ways has shown me that one can make a point or have a larger, underlying meaning without being outright politicized. Through presentation, narratives, dialogues, and the development of tones and patterns, poets are able to create an earnest discourse. This is one of the things I appreciate most about poetry, and I strive for my poetry to do this.

On the cusp of leaving the nest of an MFA program, I am concerned about the world I will soon enter. For the past two and a half years, I have been saturated – perhaps oversaturated – with words and stories, with reading and editing. I've enjoyed it thoroughly, but sometimes find myself wondering how my writing has changed and who has influenced those changes. How was I affected by reading so many poetry submissions for *Bayou Magazine*? Did seeing what submitters do wrong help me improve my own writing? Or has it made me too quick to judge? Did the various opinions of workshop peers help me find my own voice, or have I grown more confused as a writer because of them?

I think that the work of poets I find inspiring, Sherman Alexie, Amiri Baraka, Nikki Giovanni, and Joy Harjo, for example, would get a mixed read from a workshop. These poems are often about personal and political struggles and histories that have been swept away. People often either like or hate these poets' work, and perhaps that is a mark of poetry. I most enjoy reading poems that allow me to peek into the mind of the poet, or at least into what I believe the mind of that poet to be. I love Baraka's poem, *Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note* because of the intimacy. Every time I read it I get caught up in the idea that "no one sings anymore" and

that the speaker's daughter is found talking to her empty hands. As someone who has studied poetry, I know the speaker of that poem says and notices these things, but I find the mind that put those words on paper most fascinating. That poem is a private one, focusing on a character's experience in their personal space. Reading it allows me to access that world. I hope that my poems have the same effect, that someone can read one of my elegies and see not only loss or grief but the processing of these emotions. Whether poetry is more private or public, I believe it can connect people: poems and their stories can create changes and bring about new dialogues. I hope that my work succeeds at doing this on some level: that someone, somewhere, finds words that I have written and responds to them in some way.

I

The Sponge Museum in Tarpon Springs

taught me about deep-water
blackouts and the bends,
severed air-lines, men caught up
on the bottom of the ocean.
They cut sponges loose,
and then themselves.
Men surfaced bloody-
eyed with bubbled skin.

Less than a quarter of a mile
below the surface
light ceases to exist.

Living in the Cyclades
I learned Tarpon Springs had it wrong.
It's peaceful under the water.
On Paros, men haul up nets of sponges.
Women hang octopi to dry.

I went with friends to the cliffs,
we wrapped our flesh
in yards of white silk
and dove into the Aegean:
sirens a while in the cold, clear sea.

Sirens like Music

My grandma remembers bomb raids at their base in Japan.
She says the sirens went off, but nothing happened.
So she waited.
Nothing happened.
She got the kids from school,
waited at home
for sirens to stop wailing.
Perhaps she rubbed her finger along
the edge of painted china while drying dishes.
That dinner set was my inheritance
but she gave it away to a neighbor
after the divorce.
She hated the Navy life, the uniform she wore
for years: plastered smile, perky breasts,
perfect hair. Plastered by mid-day,
held together by umbrella-drinks,
days at the beach.
Tumblers, ice clinked as she poured
three fingers high,
a soothing sound,
rain on the roof of her home in Hawaii.
She put the china away, plate
placed upon painted plate, placed upon shelves.
Perhaps she lifted one above her head
and slammed it down.
It would have shattered
the way a bomb does, explosive
then silent, leaving behind a shell
almost beautiful in its brokenness.

Butterflies: A Poem That Isn't Really about Butterflies

My mother-in-law tried to make polite conversation
by telling me *I used to write poetry.*

We were gardening.

I took the bait and asked *oh, really, what about?*

Butterflies and rainbows, flowers mostly, she said.

I smiled, said *that's nice,*

judged her for it, then went back to weeding.

My stepdad bought me a butterfly knife when I was fifteen.

He showed me how to flick out the blade

and shove it into the thigh

of someone coming at me from behind;

how to twist my wrist so the wound wouldn't close.

After my parents' divorce, we didn't refer to my father by name.

We called him "It."

My mom would let us know

It left a message for you on the machine,

call It back so It doesn't keep calling.

When the phone rang all day

or the door was knocked late at night,

I'd lay in bed, stomach tied in knots,

hand clutched around something I could throw.

Pull the Blinds

My daddy likes to talk.
He calls to say he was looking
in a window while on his nightly walk
and the woman inside brushing her hair
reminded him of me.

I tell him to stop peeping.

How many times
can a phone be called in a day?

Thirty-seven.

I tell him to stop calling.
He leaves messages marked urgent.
I change my number.

How many more times
can I believe him
when he says he's changed?

Zero.

He goes to the park and talks
to other people's children.
He sits on a bench and watches
kids run around. They play
Ring-Around-The-Rosie.
London Bridge.
It all falls down.

My Father's Dad Used to Say All Days End the Same

The nurse asked if you drank and you said
only on days that end in y. I told her
you were joking. She asked again
and you told her *yes, but only when I drive*.

You never drank. You joked
heavily. I did both as you got worse.
We sat around the hospital bed
in your den, old cups
filled with good whiskey. I listened
with cousins and aunts to your breathing.

On day three, you opened your eyes
and I said *Grandpa, Grandpa*
can you hear me? Do you hurt?
You fluttered your eyelids,
then a cousin asked *Grandpa,*
are you pretty? You smiled,
slowly said *so, so pretty*.

When the undertaker arrived we had you dressed
in your favorite purple socks, a denim shirt.
Your hat that read *spend your dough before you go*.

The undertaker dropped you.
We caught you before you hit the floor.
Someone asked you *what's the hurry?*
I told the undertaker not to worry.
You were always a difficult man.

The Borrowed Beach House

Finger on the trigger he smiled at us,
as if saying *look what I can do*.

His face framed by messy blonde curls,
pink lips parted around the muzzle of a toy gun.

Coffee was spilled.
Mimosas were made.

His mother took the toy, said *that is not
what guns are for*, throwing it away.

He nodded, danced out onto the balcony,
into the sun.

Someone gave us keys to this strange life;
we did the best we could.

On vacation, our lives on loan,
pictures were taken: point, click, shoot.

Weeki Wachee

I posed beside the mermaid,
not knowing at the age of three
that she was just *mermaiding*,
playing the part for little pay,
growing her hair long so girls
like me would believe that we
could live in springs. I watched
the show, wondered how to
breathe in a spring so deep
the bottom hadn't been found.
Water rushes up from caverns,
millions of gallons each day.
How was it years ago –
littered with junk? Just old cars,
broken refrigerators and bones?

The Road Kill

My best friend hit a deer
on a scenic highway in South Carolina.
She paid her insurance company \$500
and they removed the deer
from where her right headlight
used to be, remounted the engine,
replaced the headlight, put on a new coat of paint,
and then she was back out there on the road.

A ribcage on the highway
and a trail of fur stretched along asphalt.
Yellow signs instruct me
to *merge safely* and *watch out for deer*.
Seven other lanes of traffic
make that a hard thing to do.
Impossible to stay alert in this heat,
so I focus on not tailgating the car ahead,
having figured that it would cost me
5,000 hours of my life to buy it.

My mom's dad tried to walk across a six-lane road in Florida.
He made it two before a truck smashed him.
His body shut down before paramedics arrived.
We drove down for the memorial service,
then had his remains crypted near us in North Carolina.
He's in a cemetery off a winding rural road
which has grown to six lanes and is littered
with cigarette butts, soda bottles, and road-kill.

Deer graze among those headstones now.
They have nowhere else to go.

A Simple Malformation

Get well balloons remind me of the helium shortage, which reminds me of this summer's MRI. I had spun out of control. One morning I woke and couldn't walk straight; my head spun and there was morning sickness. Doctors warned of brain tumor while I prayed it wasn't pregnancy. June, the month of doctors not knowing what was going on. Thus, the machine, the MRI that could peak inside my skull. My eyes still unable to focus a page when the results came in; a doctor told me, in better words, that I wasn't about to die. A simple malformation, an extended brain stem causes pressure. Pressure causes headaches, causes vertigo, causes vision loss. No cause for worry. You will be just fine, take your balloon and go on, now.

2,100 Miles without a Map

My great grandfather waited
for the Blue Ridge to switch seasons.
Then he went away with so many leaves
into winds that brought forth winter.

After he died I left Seattle's cold gray rain
and drove for two days, running
off cigarettes and coffee.

It was his favorite time, before misty haze
gave way to snow clouds. When it got cold enough
he'd curse all the years he'd spent up north, shoveling.

After he died I drove south, then east, then south again,
following my memory over mountains, through cornfields,
beside rivers leading home. When I got there,
the lakes were dry, the grass gone.

Seacow

At Homosassa Springs I met manatees,
their mossy backs
scarred by motorboats
speed-bumping over them.
Snorkeling tourists are told
to let the “seacow” come to them,
to act like we are not there.

Getting off the boat I forgot,
said *hey mermaid*
and choked down water.
Surfacing I smiled,
wiped my mask and tried again
to dead-float in the twilight.
Glub, glub, lub.

Daddy Longlegs of the Evening - Hope!

-The Dali Museum, St. Petersburg, Florida

My daddy has longlegs like I do.
He can't play his instrument.
It is as liquid as he is.

The child covers her eyes to avoid
viewing the gelatinous man.

Above her, a cannon leans on a cane,
shoots out a skinless horse and a puddle
of white goop that pools on the ground.

In the background, in the mist,
people are headless and don't see
what they don't want to.

My daddy has longlegs like I do,
legs I hope he never sees again.

Living Still Life

-The Dali Museum, St. Petersburg, Florida

A dancer friend told me men
thread needles by pushing through the hole
and women slide the opening around the thread.

In Dali's painting, everything but the table floats:
the knife, the plates, the fruit.
Sometimes I wake afraid
that I am falling.
My body pounds the bed
and my husband rolls over,
puts his arm around me.

There is a hand holding a horn
at the edge of the painting.
I can't figure out
what a horn has to do with dinner.
Something about meat, about killing?

When I dance with my friend
I am a dead fish.
He is rotting fruit.
We are a still life moving fast.

The Disintegration of the Persistence of Memory

-The Dali Museum, St. Petersburg, Florida

Outside the museum the sun was shining.
Birds were flying. Boats bobbed upon the bay.

Under a sheet of water strung
from a branch, time melts so much.
I can't remember where his hands
were when I was younger.

Sometimes I wake from a dream trembling
like a finger tired from overwork.
Darkness and ropes mean
something, but I don't know what.

In the museum: grains of sand that don't sand.
Someone tell me what holds a beach together.

II

Something About Borders

Firework stores mark state lines.
South of the Border is famous
for billboards and tackiness.
“You’re a wiener at Pedro’s”
painted below a giant hot dog.
A totaled car floating among trees,
the words “smash hit” painted above it.
Every July we drove I-95 south
to find things that could explode.

Three dollars bought a ride
to the top of a giant sombrero
where I could watch the highway
as people moved over the border,
snowbirds to Florida,
teenagers breaking spring
so many Cadillacs and Camaros.

We’d stop there on the way
to Myrtle Beach concerts
and parties – nights drunk
by the ocean, making out
with strangers, stubbing toes
on the rotting boardwalk.

Alcohol was served in airplane bottles,
each drink, a new bottle cracked open,
a new world of possibility swallowed.

Radio blaring and hair wind-blown,
a summer storm forced us to stop
at South of the Border
on our way home.
We stood in the brim of Pedro’s sombrero,
watched as a car was pulled from underneath a truck,
the driver’s body bagged up and driven away
as we turned pale and goosebumped in the rain.

The Long Street All-stars

★ Justin ★

Justin let me in when I showed up
drunk at 3 a.m. We'd crawl into bed,
sprawl out, each with a foot on the floor
to stop the spins. In the bathroom
a counter groaned with the weight
of bodies thrust together. *This is not romantic*,
whispered one reflection to the other.
After a party gone wrong he wore a light blue
button down shirt stained with blood.
I watched his cigarette turn to ash in its tray
as he stirred spaghetti sauce so it wouldn't burn.

★ The Marsh Brothers ★

I was curled in the crook of Adam's arm after one
too many keg stands. He told me *I love you*,
I said *I don't want to be alone*.
Nick once plucked the leg off a grasshopper
then hit it with it. We laughed at the time,
but maybe we should have run.
Adam led me into his curtained room
to show off his knives and guns.
That night the picnic table didn't mean to break
the bottle of Jager, but the Marshes set it on fire,
and the cops came to Long Street.

★ Matt ★

Dead-drunk in the backseat, Matt shot up
and sang *boys, boys, all types of boys*,
then crumpled back to sleep.
He didn't appreciate the shirt I gave him
for Christmas. It had a horse printed on it,
the word *hung*. A gun pushed against
Matt's face wanted him gone, and go Matt did,
faster than New Year's booze and resolutions.
He leaned into me once and asked his beer
how many ways there were to forget a person.
I think the answer may be zero.

To Save, Press 9

I save voicemails now. The first time I realized you were gone. I was swimming, just days after your funeral. If something goes wrong or the end of the world comes, I can dial up my voicemail and listen to those I care for say *hello... love you... miss you*. Or whatever it is voices are always waiting to say.

We used to drive to the lake when it was hot and miserable and the only thing that could make us feel better was strong breeze, high speeds, and the cooling splash of water. I think the sun killed you. It glared into your eyes, blanched the roads so they looked like desert, making IEDs hard to find. If an emergency arises and I need a familiar voice, nothing assures me my cell phone will work, that saved voices will be there.

We went swimming with friends during a thunderstorm. My cell phone saves messages for forty days, so every few weeks I resave them. Floating, looking at the sky. Lightning struck a tree nearby. When our friend taught overseas I saved her last message for over two years. Before the lake was a lake it was a farming community, small but prosperous. Under the water are houses and barns. Some paved roads rotting away.

I deleted your last message a month before you died. I couldn't imagine the sun turning against you or the sand turning dark with your blood. The first time you came back from Iraq you said *the sun shines so hard there it dries out everything, even me*. We were by a pool then. Without finishing your beer you dove in, can in hand, clothes still on. I hope I die by water.

Figs

I toasted a new year then walked home
alone at one AM after growing tired
of watching my girlfriends kiss.

My best friend gave me a fig tree once.
I watered it every day, not knowing it could drown.
I left town for two weeks and got home to see it fruiting.

Full of spring island breeze and ouzo,
I stared at a man in the doorframe
until my friend placed him on my lap.

I was followed fifteen blocks,
then spotted a house with Christmas lights
and people on the porch. We watched him lurk
under a streetlight, flipping a knife around in his hand.

She dated a guy who didn't want to fuck,
he just wanted to get naked and kiss,
sometimes lay down to look at
and lick between her thighs.

Waking by the ocean on some rocks the next morning,
salt water stings my rock-scraped palms and knees.
He says *καλημέρα* and I say *goodbye*, he grabs my hand
says *Σ'αγαπώ* and I pretend to not understand.

We went inside to dance and play beer-pong.
A sore loser shouted *I'll kill you*.
I hummed along with *Boys Don't Cry*.
Eventually the man went away, and so did I.

In the yellow painted kitchen a teapot whistled
as she spread crushed figs on toast
before moving away again.

Over brunch, my friend chuckled
when I raved about how good dried figs are.
She explained that *fig*, *σύκο*, is slang for “cunt,”
the way a ripe one looks when cut in half.
The way a vagina looks, cut open.

Avocados

I argue with my husband about him leaving
the empty jar of salsa in the fridge,
why he never takes me dancing.

At a Mexican restaurant a friend spends twenty minutes
deciding between avocado salad and tortilla soup.
Little choices mean a lot to her.

I pry pits to make guacamole
for Occupiers at Duncan Plaza.
Over lunch, a man asks me what is for dinner.
I don't know and he says *you know nothing*.

Before my husband was my husband
he slept with another woman
in his tent during a protest.
I said that was fine,
but I haven't been camping since.

She walks the aisles of grocery stores.
Bright lights. Ordered rows.
Empty handed, she goes home.

A roommate once told me, while applying face masks
made from ground up avocados
that *avocado* comes from an Aztec word for testicle.

My husband doesn't mind when our drunk friend
licks the back of my neck and passes out in our yard.
He brings out a sleeping bag and a bottle of water.
Worries the next morning when both are empty.

Alone, she dreams of beaches
free of men running shirtless,
waiting for a shoe to untie
so they can stop and stare.

The fleshy, pear-shaped fruit is difficult to bear.
Semi self-pollinating, it is hard for this species to breed.

For Shearon Harris Nuclear Power Plant

The school bus took us
to the underbelly
of electricity,
to learn
what made lights
come on
when we flipped a switch:
cores, coolant, technicians,
an emergency lake
the security guards
let us picnic by.

One of us asked about bombs,
(as in Hiroshima or Nagasaki.)
The tour guide explained
that *the future is nuclear and safe*.
We wouldn't become shadows on a wall.

My friends work at that plant now,
understand where the white cloud
always off in the distance
comes from.
Their kids ask questions
that don't get answered.
My friends teach me more
than tours ever did,
things I'd rather not know.
A fault line runs under Harris Lake.
Three risks of meltdown.
Those nuclear evacuation signs:
just there for peace of mind.

For Dorothea Dix Mental Institution

1848-2010

It has the best view of the city,
brick buildings nestled on rolling hills.
So many dirty windows,
no one washes them,
no one gazes through.

Patients were pushed out
so a park could be built.
Overlooking the skyline,
I ask my best friend
what will happen
to the bed-less crazies.

She stayed here once,
when too many pills was
a way of saying *stop*,
I've had enough.
When I was young
my grandpa was committed.
I'm not sure if he stayed here,
but this place is familiar.

Now, when brains shut down
or emotions don't work,
the shade of many oaks
will not be there to heal.
Just tourists, cameras, people
posing by the mental institute sign.
Most won't imagine how it feels
to look upon a beautiful thing
and know it cannot be reached.

For Falls Lake

Sitting on a cliff,
waiting to come down
off the mushrooms,
Adam looks at the lake.
His friend's body is still stuck
down there from an accident last year.

The friend jumped from a nearby cliff,
hit a submerged rock, sucked
in water, and never resurfaced.
Trying to find him,
the guys dove into the night
but found nothing.
Dove into the night
for empty bottles,
ruined clothes.
Kept diving.

Heat lightning or
hallucinations
light up the water.
I run my fingers
through Adam's hair
and tell him not to worry,
that he can just float and breathe.

When Adam's lungs
collapsed in his sleep,
I felt like a liar.
Wondered if he dreamed
of the falls or me
as he drowned in his body.

Skunk Hour

- After Lowell's "Skunk Hour," for Silver Lake Waterpard

Silver Lake's swan
errs like the Red-cockaded and Wedgemussel;
her ability to survive is questionable.
Her cygnets still gaze to the street.
Her cob's a goner. Her chances
of being clipped by a speedy car:
high in her old age.

This poor bird
cannot buy anything
from the city of oaks.
She waits. Watches
townhouses approach her shore.
She wastes away.

Winter lasts long –
fallen are our shiny kings,
their pawns who pushed for this development
have moved on to other promises.
Oak woods once preserved are bulldozed.
A light snow can't hide the scar.

And now spring fairies
bloom the median flowers for passersby.
Dandelions and orange butterfly weeds.
Orange. Her beak through the bushes.
There is a fence around the lake.
She is locked out.

One bright morning,
my Plymouth Scamp came around the bend.
I looked for the swans. Driving Tryon, lost,
the yellow plastic slide, gone.
Peddle boats beached now in some other town.
I don't swim anymore.

All night I sang along,
"Love is what I got," we skanked until the sweat
was gone. Ears ringing like feedback,
I sway in my seat, hands on the wheel...
hell is somewhere,
on the way home --
the drunks stumble

sidewalk, en route to brunch.
They bruise easily and burn in the sun;
mainlining the day, bloodshot eyes
under straw hair, the half-shaven
ska punks coast along.

I park the Scamp
in the lot where the lake was--
the lonesome swan stares at me when her babies don't budge.
She waddles towards a rustle in shrubs,
leaving the dry bed, empty beer cans,
and discarded condoms.

Forever Is for Fools

Drunk, near blackout in the passenger seat, Josh mumbled that he loved me. I said *great, let's get married*. The last time I saw Justin, out in the country we went barhopping into morning. Lance and I used to curl up in his car and get high. One of those nights I agreed to be his girl if we were both single at twenty-four. At seventeen I wore a promise ring, sterling silver with a chunk of cut glass. Lance died in a desert at twenty-four, alone. Three years ago I went to the magistrate's office and married someone else. I proposed to him by postcard. *Yes, no, and maybe* were his only options, so he couldn't say *fine, but only if we remove your legs so I can spin you around on my dick*. In high school I slept in a shack behind a single-wide with Chris. Roosters would crow as I threw up Wild Turkey. Youth spent in the half-light of hangovers, in the stink of bars that didn't card. One time I told Josh *it will get better*, placed my palms on his thighs, bought us shots, corrected myself, said *one day you'll find someone who loves you just the way you are*. My dashboard never forgot the time Justin and I were crammed in the front seat and Josh found us. I told Justin to leave and he did, then Josh's fist left its print in the vinyl. For years I woke up tangled in someone. When I returned the promise ring to Chris, he threw it back, said that wasn't my decision. I still wear Chris's ring sometimes, when I've misplaced my wedding band or it's grown too tight from the heat. Chris culls chickens now. When my neighbor's chicks cluck beneath the floorboards of my house I hear *lucky cunt gonna run outta luck*.

There's an Art to This

I sent postcards from each state I went through,
scenic shots for the relatives:
Blue Ridge Parkway vistas,
rows of Texas Bluebonnets,
Joshua trees in California deserts.
Messages on the back read the same:
something about fun.

Cowboys on jack rabbits,
drag queens of Bourbon street:
those went to friends.
Scrawled on the flip side by splashes of wine:
why did you stay behind?

The trick to post-carding is to tell it straight,
to let the image explain.

This Christmas I was given a box-set of postcards
with images of small dolls doing naughty things on them.
I like how the tininess of those dolls and what they do
make all I've done seem little, too.

For Belltown

At Starbucks Trevor pockets sugar packets
as I wonder if the needle exchange will save him.

Pigeons pace the sidewalk,
their necks pierced by hypodermics.

The chirp of the crosswalk
makes us look to an empty sky.
Blocks have been bulldozed.
Cranes will soon be coming.

Our city springs a leak,
and then his car does.
Drip drip drip on his forehead;
the backseat damp, blooming.
He curls up tight, pretends he's dry.

Mildew grows on clothes;
his body sinks in sleep,
molding into upholstery.
His car was my car,
given to him when I moved away.
He was clean then, working.

Walking across the Aurora Bridge
we noticed emergency phones.
The suicide fence going up
was not there for us to climb,
its height not a test for flight.
Below, boats showed what we'd never be:
secure upon the surface.

Hook Will Bring You Back

Somewhere now, between me and you,
a postcard is in transit. On one side, an island,
maybe full of Lost Boys fighting pirates.
But I know an island is just an island,
not somewhere to never grow old.

We both have *bangarang* tattooed on our ribcages.
Most don't get it, but for those who do,
I say, *yeah, we can crow.*

On a rooftop drinking, you asked me *do you think I can fly?*
I said, *yes, if you've found*
your happy thought, unaware
what made you happiest, disappearing.

After your father's funeral we shot tequila.
We spun around outside, tried to find
the *second star to the right* to carry us into morning.

We said we'd never forget. Did we ever
say goodbye? *Goodbye means going away,*
and going away means forgetting.

On the back of the postcard
I scrawled the word *thimble*.

A kiss, something
I could never give you.
And *never is an awfully long time.*

If this were the story, I am the Wendy.
You are a short haired woman in tights,
suspended in air, looking for adventure.
I ask you from my chair *boy, why are you crying?*

We Can Crow

1

When Lance died I was still in Seattle.
I came home to my Cherry Street apartment
to find a crow waiting on my porch.
I was drinking in the kitchen
when the crow flew at my screen door.

When he enlisted I told him *it's your funeral.*

I asked the crow what it wanted.
The crow cawed a reply
and I said *sorry,*
I don't understand.
There's nothing I can do.

We always knew Lost Boys fight, fly, and die.

2

Last week on the dunes at Carolina Beach
I found a bird's wing
in a clump of sea grass.

The beached bird's wing
is now a wind-chime
hanging by my window.
Wind blows and the bones
tell crows to stay away.

More than Zero

Your hair is what I loved when we were young, longer than mine, straight and blonde. As I waited to fly back home from RDU after your funeral I watched new recruits wait to be shipped off to basic. So young and excited; I wanted to say *don't*, but just finished my cigarette.

The last time I saw you alive, your hair was gone and your muscles had grown. When you picked me up and tossed me onto that hotel bed, I knew we would never work. I was too drunk to bike home, so we took off some clothes and I stayed the night. Every time I see a young man in an Army uniform, I think, for just a moment, he is you. Before we fell asleep I asked how many Iraqis you had killed. You pulled me in closer. I still think that means more than zero. Leaving your hotel room the morning after, soldiers' eyes followed me down the hall away from you. The next day an earthquake shook a crack into my apartment's wall, right above the window. When you emailed to say you had signed on for another tour, my landlord still hadn't fixed the wall. I'd touch the crack, look out at the mountains. When it rained, water pooled on my windowsill.

Hair and nails keep growing once we die. That's a lie. Our bodies just dry out, but I like imagining you asleep in your casket, looking as you used to.

Whiskey and an Apology

The rural Baptist church I barely remembered. Two pictures flanked your casket: one, a soldier, the other a Muay Thai fighter. I kept looking for a picture of you I knew, but that white-trash hippie had been gone for years. Your plan was to play Army, then move to Thailand. Said I should visit you there. That afternoon men in Army uniforms called you a hero as I muttered with our friends about stupidity. In Thailand, a funeral lasts for at least one week. Crying is discouraged. Mourners try not to worry the dead with their suffering. Outside your funeral bikers made sure anti-war protestors didn't disturb the service. I never cry at funerals, I cry making coffee, watching a movie, looking for button mushrooms at the grocery store. At Thai funerals, monks come and go, reciting prayers and preparing the spirit to move forward. When the redneck bikers left, after your casket was lowered and mourners had gone away, I went to your grave with Jack Daniels and candles. People had already left dog tags and American flags, fake flowers and little crosses. Thai mourners make a book containing the story of the deceased. They write poems about them and leave them on an altar. Here.

My Brain Makes Sense Like This

1

The car I used to race you in is gone. Set on fire, some druggie trying to get out of the rain. Living at the Bog. Gardens turned to marsh, washed away. We used to be all smiles and laughter, reckless, driving home stoned. A hundred years ago The Bog was a landfill. Before that, a cemetery, Mary, Mary, your garden grows on bones. I visit your grave, listen for the wind to cry. A woman left lonely will soon grow tired of waiting. She'll do crazy things. Your mom, out of sons, painted your face on her car and was gone.

2

The car fire, at The Bog.	I used to race some druggie trying to away.	get out of	you in the rain.	is gone. Set on Living Gardens turned to marsh, washed
	We used to be		all smiles and laughter,	reckless,
		driving home stoned.		
A hundred years ago		The Bog was a landfill.		
	your garden grows	on bones.	Before that, a cemetery, Mary, Mary,	I visit your grave,
listen for	the wind	to cry.		
A woman left lonely	will do	crazy things.	Your mom, all out of sons, she painted	and was gone.
	your face	on her car		

3

The car fire at The Bog. Listen for a woman left lonely. I used to race some druggie trying to away. ~~Your face~~. A hundred years ago your garden grows. We used to be the wind. The wind will do. We used to be on her car. Get out of driving home stoned. The Bog was a landfill on bones. To cry. Crazy things. You in the rain. All smiles and laughter. Before that, a cemetery, Mary, Mary, your mom, all out of sons, she painted and was gone. Is gone. Gardens turned to marsh. I visit your grave. Set on living. Washed. Reckless.

Good Luck

A bird almost shat on me this morning. I watched it as I walked, convinced that bird resting on a wire would be the seventh to get me. The last time I heard Lance: in a voicemail, asking me to ride with him to DC for the protest against the Iraq War. Protests annoy me, but I went anyway and yelled with strangers at buildings and streets that weren't listening. I encounter dead birds a lot. In Seattle, at a protest, there was a dead bird on the sidewalk with a cigarette near its beak. I took its picture and posted it in an online album I've entitled, "Dead Birds Don't Fly." Hummingbirds are attracted to the color blue; they scavenge for it in nature, clutch it in their beaks to weave into nests. People tell me it is good luck to have a bird shit on you. In the last text Lance sent me he wrote *9 fucking days to not die and I get to come home :) and I'm getting out when we get back, so Yea for ME!!!* I watched a documentary about resistance fighters in Iraq. A scene at sunset with a mosque in the background: so many birds flying around it. Bodies have been found with pulpy eyes because hummingbirds have pecked the irises out. I found a dead bird on my porch once, put it in a jar and kept it in my apartment until it began to smell. Walking home from that protest in Seattle, someone asked me what we were fighting for and I said *Freedom!* I wish I hadn't deleted those messages or his cousin's email saying Lance had died. Wish I hadn't thrown a beer bottle at the American Apparel window. In the documentary there were American soldiers running around. My beer bottle shattered and the window remained perfect.

The Trigger Effect

We carried candles
and walked
with a jazz band.
The moon was up,
the stars were out,
somewhere else
the sun was still shining.
Our second line stalled
outside the studio
where blood became paint.

The crowd thinned for drinks.
Turning with the river,
I know where I am.
I am walking up a hill with a friend
in summer sundresses.
Hers is white and short,
pink flowers on it,
an x-backed,
wide-strapped thing.
Mine is knee length,
dark blue with yellow daisies,
ruffled bust, belted waist.

Twenty years ago I walked with a friend.
The sun burnt our skin;
now I'm freckled and walking flat land.
I don't know what happened to that sundress;
I wore it and then it was gone.
I don't know what happened to that friend;
I used to see her all the time.

We're Wireless

I've sent Lance some emails since he died, thinking maybe those messages could reach him because like my laptop, he is not wired to anything. I have a cellphone with his number still in it though I know that number is no longer his number and that I will never call it. Deleting it would be giving up, letting go. I like to hold onto something long enough for it to hurt. Hug too hard, kiss until my lips are sore. In my dreams I used to walk the tracks from one run-down town to another. It was just my phone and me, out there between cities. In my dream my phone never rings and I don't check voicemails. After Lance died I boarded a plane, promised the clouds this was the last time I'd plow through them. Walking downtown, I notice payphones are disappearing. Dial tones barely exist anymore. I never was good at keeping promises. Sometimes mid-flight I look out the window, wondering whose death made this possible.

Under the Sea

Lance died in a desert and was flown home to be buried. I once read a story about a mother explaining death to her little boy. She told him that when people die they go live at the bottom of the sea to make caramels. I have visited Lance underwater in my dreams and we swim with our sparkling mermaid tails. When Bin Laden died he was buried at sea because no country would accept his body. I leave candles, cigarettes, and whiskey by Lance's headstone because I think he'll be able to use them. In the mother's story, caramels float to the surface, but the dead remain down there. Prayers were said before Bin Laden was tossed in. I've said no prayers for my friend but I write him poems and worry that he'll hate them. It is beautiful down below, soundless so I don't know if the dead like it there. Opening their mouths, only bubbles come out.

Vita

Kelly Jones was born in Raleigh, North Carolina. She grew up around that city she moved away after high school. Prior to attending UNO, she studied Literature and Social Justice at Antioch University Seattle. Before obtaining her BA from Antioch she was awarded a scholarship to write and study poetry at Hellenic International in Parikia, Greece. She'd like very much to go back there. Kelly's interests have flipped between social activism and poetry a few times, and she hopes to figure out a way to combine the two after leaving the CWW.