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## Her Sweetest Comeback

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Her Sweetest Comeback

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  
Creative Writing  
Poetry

by

Kelly Gangeness Le

B.A. Drake University, 2012

May, 2019

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## Abstract

Kelly Gangeness Le's poetry manuscript focuses on paradoxical values concerning horror and humor paired with family and isolation. With the aesthetic approach that poetry ought to resemble the emotional intensity of music, Le strives for animated language. Her influences come from coarse, post-hardcore music and Lucie Brock-Broido's scholarly yet brutal poetry. Thus she negotiates between lowbrow and literary dynamics.

Family; Horror; Humor; Dissonance

## Preface: a Departure

When I was ten, my father, an obstetrician gynecologist, underwent multiple surgeries for a brain tumor. When one went wrong, he had to go on Disability due to chronic pain and a litany of other health problems. He felt as though his life was over. His identity as a doctor, in which he had invested decades, was erased. To this day, he takes so many different medications they fill three gallon-sized Ziploc bags. My family and I mirrored and internalized his pain as if it were our own. To make matters worse, we lost nearly everything. We lost the house my parents built. We lost our self-esteem.

As I grew older, in response to my family's loss, I started wearing all black, visiting graveyards, and listening to post-hardcore music. Music was an outlet to understand my suffering. Jordan Dreyer, the lead singer of La Dispute, in "a Departure" sings, "I used to never think of death or hear voices/ I used to think that everything was perfectly in order/ a normal life/ but I guess then came a departure" (Dreyer, 2011). When I turned eighteen, as a rite of passage, my friends invited me to the cemetery to go ghoulish-hunting on a particular night. They claimed that the event changed me. Perhaps spirits had possessed me. My supposed possession became a running joke through the years.

I later found a book on possession, *The Unquiet Dead* by Dr. Edith Fiore. This book validated my friends' made-up possession story. I attributed all of my obsessive-compulsive thoughts, binge drinking, and impulsive behavior to possession. I found a scapegoat for my inability to care for myself as an adult. Of course, I was possessed! Sometimes my theory worked as a joke. Other times, I think it may still be true.

My family members and I cope with our problems by binge drinking, entering co-dependent relationships, and observing religious superstitions. In my early twenties, my own obsessive-compulsive disorder reached a point where I could no longer function. I could not hold a job for more than three months, let alone recognize how my reality was blurring. I became so afraid of my intrusive thoughts that I rarely left my grandparents' house, and I sobbed constantly. My face filled with acne. I lost hair. My body betrayed me, as I turned to more and more self-destructive behavior whenever I became angry that my life was not going the way I had envisioned.

The family tragedy and its aftermath shaped my poetics before I wrote poetry consistently. I grappled with finding an artistic medium to channel my past. To tell my stories, I needed a narrative form that could include both fiction and non-fiction. For example, the poems, "As Punishment for Writing about My Mother, Whitney Houston Plays in My Head Eternally" and "Rosary Casino Party," blur fact and fiction to create narratives true to the poems.

I realized the power of poetry when I was an undergraduate at Drake University. I decided that poetry was like music, but more academic. I value music for its emotional and animated intensity. I found solace in Lucie Brock-Broido's language. Her collection, *Trouble in Mind*, shares dissonance and violent themes with hardcore music, but through scholarly diction. Her poem "Boy At the Border of His Own Allegory" reads like a metalcore song: "A boy phones... To tell me he has a shotgun/ Muzzle to the inside/ Of his romance-speaking/ Mouth. I tell him, take it from that ragged/ North Sea Lair and put it to/ The milk and honey coffer/ Of your chest" (Brock-Broido 23). The speaker tells the "boy" to kill himself, but with lush language that creates a tangible image, such as "muzzle," "coffer," and "ragged." The lyrics of



the band Senses Fail, however, need to be sung for full impact: “Don’t try/ to be cute with me/ because I know you hate yourself/ and you’d end/ your stupid life now/ but you’re too spineless” (Nielsen, 2004). Although the song engages colloquial and abstract language while Brock-Broido’s poem offers concrete imagery, both relay a similarly desperate message that resonates with me.

As a poet not a songwriter, I strive for Brock-Broido’s intensity. For example, in the poem, “The Price of Visiting the Swan Pond,” I hope my diction proves ominous and dissonant in order to create grotesque imagery: “hooved ghouls/ with claws for eyes covered in algae.” I attempt to apply the grotesque for a shape-shifting effect by describing the ghouls as tangible entities with physical hooves and claws in place of their eyes. While drafting, I was tempted to use phrases such as “fuck me” and “fuck you” to describe the relationship between the speaker and the ghouls, but I cut the expletives because they expressed a coarseness that resembled the tone of Senses Fail’s lyrics. This practice of restraint through revision can give my poems greater subtext and intensity.

Brock-Broido’s formal poetics helps her achieve refined intensity. But I also want my poems to entertain with glib humor. One exciting feature of intensity is that it can push the limits between polar extremes. For example, in “HOT TOPIC Medley,” I attempt to celebrate and critique the ridiculousness of the “emo” subculture through profane language. I also experiment with the poetic line by formatting the poem with a blend of diary entries and lists. The speaker says, “Last week, I wanted to be a band boy with a huge dick. Another reason I ought to quit HOT TOPIC?”

I like to think of unrefined yet intensive and entertaining poems as Looney Tune character runarounds; they're fun, experimental, and a departure from formality. The very phrase "Looney Tunes" sounds amusing. Synonyms for the word "looney" include *bedlamite*, *crazy person*, *manic*, and *psycho*. Other synonyms for the word "tunes" include *adjust*, *adapt*, *attune*, *harmonize*, *reconcile*. So, Looney Tunes equal crazy person harmonies or, for short, "crazy music."

Consequentially, to create the effects I want, I find that I negotiate between literary and lowbrow dynamics. I intend for my formal and free verse poems to co-exist and contradict one another playfully. At times, the variety of forms and stylistic choices meet and seemingly work together. For example, in the poem, "But Lord, I'm So Forlorn, I Just Can't See No Unicorn," I use couplets while the narrative confronts the strange relationship between unicorns, popular culture, self-destruction, and marriage.

In some poems I attempt to use popular culture as a vehicle for social criticism, such as "XXX Hostess Cupcake: Her Sweetest Comeback" after *Gurlesque* poetics. In the introduction to the *Gurlesque* anthology, Lara Glenum defines these poets as "taking a page from the burlesque, perform[ing] their femininity in a campy or overtly mocking way. Their work assaults the norms of acceptable female behavior by irreverently deploying gender stereotypes to subversive ends" (Glenum). The *Gurlesque* celebrates the extreme, violent, and erotic. In "XXX Hostess Cupcake: Her Sweetest Comeback," I want to exploit the Hostess brand's 2013 tagline, "The Sweetest Comeback in History of Ever" to comment on the contemporary hookup culture. I imply with a pun that the word "comeback" is erotic. The cupcake persona justifies why the "you" should prefer her, she belittles other personified baked goods such as "Little Debbie" and

“Betty Crocker.” In addition, the cupcake persona calls herself “a deep fried mess” and “dry,” which may provide evidence of her low self-esteem due to her experiences with hookup culture.

The books *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*, by Carol J. Clover, and *Chain Saw Confidential: How we Made the World’s Most Notorious Horror Movie*, by Gunnar Hansen, argue that horror movies speak for the oppressed. This theory inspired my Leatherface poems. Leatherface is a character in the original 1974 film, *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*. What loss had his family experienced to make Leatherface want to murder others and wear their skin as a mask while still playing the role of the obedient, pathetic son? I choose to include my family poems and Leatherface poems in one manuscript to suggest a connection between the two families. As I drafted the horror poems, I became disturbingly surprised by the similarities Leatherface and the speaker share. Because of this intersection, I created a mock Venn diagram, “Leatherface and Me: A Study,” to depict similarities between Leatherface and my speaker. I hope the visual effect can contribute to a discussion on how loss and family play a role in horror. As Tobe Hooper’s *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* tagline asks, “Who will survive and what will be left of them?”

ONE

*This whole world can disappear. Everything  
you know can go. You won't even recognize  
your own hands.*

Sam Shepard, *A Lie of the Mind*

As Punishment for Writing About My Mother, Whitney Houston Plays in My Head Eternally

My mother hasn't listened  
to your song "The Greatest Love of All"  
since my parents lost the dream home  
built with the money Dad made  
delivering babies. *I believe  
the children are our future*

until the Greek tragedy  
of Dad's brain tumor: family curse  
of Disability, no homecomings,  
his liver eaten every day,  
every day our eyes put out.

I miss the streams of pink canopies  
above my bed, how Mom dressed  
us girls in blue pea coats, cream lace.  
*I have nothing, nothing, nothing.*

We were prepared for 1985  
instead of the unknown new  
millennium. Did you ever  
dream you'd always look  
like your self-titled 1985 album

cover? You wore a silk toga  
in a garden that swelled  
with oranges as dark green  
blurred into the backdrop  
of paradise. *If I fail, if I*

*succeed, at least I'll live  
as I believe.* But in 2012  
you were found dead  
at the Beverly Hilton  
in the bath with cocaine

and champagne nearby. Sung  
your top hits with the McIntosh  
speakers we saved, wept. I did not  
play "The Greatest Love of All."  
Like mother, like daughter.

In 1999, Mom twirled  
as that song played on  
those speakers tall as the ceilings  
of our sold dream home.

*No matter what they take  
from me, they can't take away*

*my dignity.* Although I am no  
goddess like you, in the year 2020,  
New Orleans, I will drink a bottle  
of champagne, wrap a stringy towel  
around me like a toga, in a shotgun  
rental, alone, then draw a hot bath.

Images of dull pastel flowers  
will line my bathroom walls,  
the background of my eyes fading  
into a green, dark from the steam.  
As I drop the towel to enter  
the water, I will fall, and where  
will the future go now?

## A Hamster's Life Expectancy

In my grandparents' backyard before school  
I capitalized on a plot of land so littered  
with pine needles no grass could grow.  
I pierced the dry dirt with sticks  
then attached oak leaves to form  
a canopy above the makeshift home.

I gathered berries for perfume,  
dug up rusted nails and Michelob Light  
bottle caps to make birdbaths.  
I balanced each cap on the flat of the nail.  
I repurposed slate slabs from my grandparents' roof  
for seed offerings. These hamster villages  
were little shrines for you, Teddy.

After school, I checked that the offerings  
were taken by other rodents.  
Squirrels, chipmunks, any of your cousins would do  
to celebrate you. I did not think about your body  
in a shoebox lost in the garage.  
Instead, I repaired caved-in houses  
from rodent parties. I made bustling villages  
for your afterlife, a picture of paradise.

Now, at 27, noontime, I illuminate a mantle  
with manufactured skulls and battery-operated candles.  
I turn off the lights to watch them flicker,  
and lose my body in bed.

On break at work, I collect more decorations  
from the nearby Wal-Mart  
with the remainders  
of my retail paycheck.

In the night, the batteries may go dead,  
but at least I know where power rests:  
underneath each skull, a chamber asks  
for alkaline. AAA batteries are guaranteed  
to last two years, the life expectancy  
of a hamster. A generated graveyard  
to kindle my loss for always.

## In This House

From the attic, there is no smoke detector. There is no escape ladder. Unopened student loan bills under my name sprawl out across the floor. Access doors hold dated newspaper clippings of Nanny's dead sons. Down the stairs on the second floor, Nanny wallpapered the guest bedroom with a meadow of flowers. My late uncle's framed butterfly collection floats among the scenery. Down the stairs on the first floor in the living room, the grand piano's lid remains shut. See the broken down, sky blue Mazda in the driveway? Mom fled to California with it for Jazzercise modeling. Down the stairs in the basement, the blood-orange wool carpet that Nanny installed declines with age. We return to live in this house, the living and the dead.



## Rosary Casino Party

Our father made deals  
from his couch throne.  
He pulled the coffee table  
close so he could rest his belly.  
He spread the rosary  
on the coffee table  
to serve as cup-holder  
for his oversized coffee mug  
of Michelob Light.  
The golden beer, like a candle,  
illuminated the beads.  
So began the circular recital.

Saint Jude on a pillow  
to his left. Porcelain Virgin Mary  
on a pillow to his right.  
Mary faltered a bit,  
so he had to place  
her on her back. Not  
everyone can be perfect.

Mysteries and Mary,  
his mug overflowed  
in our living room.  
Here is where the bets  
flowed endless like  
Michelob Light. Here is  
where Dad made deals  
with dead men through prayer.  
Dad asked his latest  
dead friend, Mark Wonderlin,  
if he could help find  
his wedding ring.  
Dad said he'd give  
up anything!  
Mark laughed, and said,  
"What about drinking?"

Dad made the deal.  
Forty days and forty nights  
he rode the wagon,  
holding on tight.

He asked us daughters  
to draw calendars  
on blank posters so  
he could *mark* every  
day a victory those  
forty days and forty nights.  
Dad wore the rosary  
and kept his faith in Mark.

Our father kept  
his end of the deal,  
until night forty,  
the big reveal.  
At dinner, we prayed,  
but as Dad sat down,  
he said, "It felt  
like something just jumped  
up and bit me!"  
He grabbed his back pant  
pocket. He felt the ring,  
and said to Mark,  
"Okay, just one more thing..."

Maintenance at North Forty Mini Golf

*The second heaven is ruled by Raphael and is a dark  
penal area where fallen angels await judgment.*

—Rosemary Ellen Guiley, *The Encyclopedia of Angels*

At open, my brother Matt must sweep for loiterers  
and cigarette butts in the parking lot  
where he sees a young woman on the course sitting  
cross-legged on a synthetic rock  
positioned by the pond.  
She reads *The Encyclopedia of Angels*.  
Matt jumps the fence and asks her to leave.  
She says, *Raphael is my favorite*.

Midday, Matt parts the pond of algae with bleach.  
The algae clumps like blood clots,  
yet when he tries to net them,  
they divide and float away from his reach.  
In his periphery, he sees the woman lean over  
the pond bridge; a hovering pest. Again  
he asks her to leave. *Raphael shepherds the lost*.

At close, the night's darkness swallows  
the course whole. Matt must retrieve  
balls from Hole 18. He approaches the cold  
underground to open the copper padlock.  
Frogs burst from the trapdoor when he reaches  
his hands into the hole for the plastic basket.  
Frogs ribbiting, a figure whispers from the fencing.  
*Raphael needs you here: fish out the balls in the pond*.

Matt drops the basket, runs to the clubhouse,  
locks the door on his way out, and fumbles to his car.  
Matt doesn't care about the salvation of anything  
but his night, his night that he is not willing to sacrifice.  
My parent's firstborn son,  
my brother, blindly follows his wild  
friends into the unknown that night.

## Game of Telephone

“There’s a ghost behind you.” I bury my face  
in a missalette. My sister stares at me with her wide,  
Communion-wafer eyes. “It’s Jesus, pass it on.”  
We change the song lyrics of “You Are Mine”  
to potty jokes, whispering, “Do not be afraid,  
I am your butt.” We stand up and mouth,  
“I love you, and your fat is mine.”  
Mom presses her index finger to her lips.  
We kneel into the pew for better balance  
with our weight pressed against the bench.  
We pretend to pray. “He’s still behind you.”  
As I peek at the rear of the church,  
my sister butts me off the bench.

From her bathroom equipped  
with a “Jesus Died for Your Sins”  
ashtray and lenticular Resurrection  
pictures, my sister calls me on the phone  
to tell me she wants to die. I ask her why.  
“Because of everything.” I say that killing herself  
would be a pretty shitty thing to do to everyone.  
The echo of her cries sounds like a hymn.  
I kneel at my bedside and pray  
for a divine intervention in that bathroom,  
and not the regular kind. Give me  
a deus ex machina, Jesus.

## Spring Break with a Friend in Rehab

I departed from the Malibu  
rehab to LAX with a rental  
on the Pacific Coast Highway.

The GPS told me to take a U-turn.

I obeyed and drove into a steep,  
brick driveway to circle back.

*Head south.*

Did I forget to pack anything? No.

Did I check the oven? You didn't  
use the oven. They had a chef.

*Rerouting.*

My friend and I chased  
syrup with French toast  
among addicts  
who screamed for heroin.

*Rerouting.*

As I reversed, the cracks  
between each brick felt wrong.

*Merge.*

As I reversed, the cracks turned  
into the rehab staff  
lady, a clear cup in hand held out  
to see me pee.

*Continue on...*

I kept telling myself to *keep going. Stop  
checking.* It's the only way to break  
SPRING BREAK 2010! Body  
shots of sparkling water abound!

Who knew rehab could be such fun?

*Make a U-turn.*

I ran over and over and over  
and over and over the addicts  
who made me feel free then  
crashed to fly away back home.

*Make a U-turn.*

## TWO

*To what degree are we held accountable for what we do, if we are controlled by spirits and are in fact “helpless” pawns? If our personalities are overwhelmed by those of our possessors, are we innocent by virtue of possession?*

Dr. Edith Fiore, *The Unquiet Dead*

## Tea Time with Friends

Cookies plated, I pour the tea.  
*So, how did you play when you were alive?*  
I wait for an answer. The fox,  
motionless, keeps his neck tilted to the left.

The badger's mouth stands open, perfectly  
still. In the playroom mirror by my outgrown  
princess bed I see wrinkles on my forehead.  
*Ok then, I'll go first, I say, my favorite game*

*is hide-and-go-seek. Their mouths stand open.*  
Still. *Like, I hide my blemishes with concealer,*  
*but they find me! Still.* While I sip the tea,  
sweets crumble and collect on their snouts.

My burn mustache throbs: extra skin  
and red lipstick bunches in the middle  
of my lips. With a doily I dab my mouth  
as the right sleeve rips on my dress.

*How do you stay so cute? Tell me*  
*your secrets!* I scratch the fox's ear.  
It plops into a teacup. I shut  
my mouth to hunt for apologies.



## The Price of Visiting the Swan Pond

Sometimes in the spring the swans splash  
glimpses of my past self in the movement  
of the water: she is pale, full of lily pads,  
eighteen and eager to finish her midnight  
stroll with friends through the cemetery.  
Headstones rise behind her,  
blanketed by snow. I throw quarters  
into the swan pond, but they slide  
across the ice. I search for the hole in the pond  
where I might bargain with the spirits, hooved ghouls  
with claws for eyes covered in algae, for whatever's  
left of—*Drop it*. Please, what else...  
*Nothing*. But you. *You can't blame us*.

First Date: Our Sweet Consumption

The big day at your grave,  
I set out a picnic-checkered tablecloth  
that drapes past the altar (so cool),  
candles (so hot), and blood  
sandwiches to share. Oh,

I forgot the flowers! I borrow  
some from your neighbor's plot.  
I sit on the dirt to admire your epitaph:

*Arthur Lander*  
*1869-1899*  
*Died of Consumption*

I'll breathe in your death!

Our death, our sweet, sweet time together,  
how I will die! But while I'm still kicking,  
I remove my shirt, lean in to your  
headstone, and lick the inscription.

My lips smack the letters *c-o-n-s-u-m*,  
*c-o-n-s-u-m*... tongue twirls to  
6 and 9, 6 and 9.

Gripping my hand on your head  
stone, you give me the chills.  
I don't want to tell you how I feel,  
in fear of scaring you off,  
but you're *so* contagious.

Our touch melts the plaque to soot,  
as my hand slides into the grave.

Vaudeville Mews, Trending

I plug in our bar Mary.  
A glowing nativity lawn ornament

with an inverted cross drawn on her forehead  
and CASH ONLY on her knuckles in Sharpie.

I sit by Mary at the door, and wait  
to take money and stamp hands.

Bearded Drunk dances  
with Mary while I watch.

Denim Bartender prays to Mary  
that he gets laid. He hands me

shots. Tatted Writer designs a sleeve for Mary  
as I ask for book recommendations from him.

I try to flirt with all of them but then  
only get to confide to Mary after close.

The guys have all contributed to her fall  
from grace. Sometimes, I look up at

the year-round Christmas  
light-laced ceiling.

Like Mary, I have found a time  
when I could find no place to stay.

After December the guys will load her back  
down to the bottomless pit of dirt and smoke,

the basement, where she'll wait alone.  
One night, Mary shines light on some gossip

she's heard about me. Everyone says I'm no permanent fixture  
here. When I'm out-of-season, where will they place me?

More Talented Townies

I wreck my vices on the living  
room carpet. *Pop it  
up!* This habit may  
one day help me  
from my parents' attic

(and firm these  
twenty-something-  
year-old buns). Besides,  
*it's fun!* But never  
can I ever change

what other more  
talented townies think  
of me, even if  
I lived on my own.  
*Yeah, that's right.*

How I've fucked  
up any chances  
of approval  
with other artists

(Phil who drums)  
(Jake who paints)  
since the love  
triangle (I was the other  
woman)

with my boss  
and the other door girl  
(his girlfriend). Ditch  
*pulling back the legs  
and not yanking*

*back the head:*  
I make carpet  
snow angels instead.  
Anyone, please  
make me better—

more *slow*

*and in control...*  
From the kitchen  
Mom yells, “Go fold  
the towels now.”

## A Sorry Excuse

I feel stupid writing  
you this letter.  
It feels so old-fashioned,  
Peter. I took your  
sandals. I don't really  
know you, Peter.  
But I know your attractive  
roommate who I  
stayed the night with,  
and he gave me  
the address to send  
them back. I'm sorry  
I took your shoes, Peter.

But I had Frontier  
flight #3420 to catch  
at LAX. And I lost  
my only pair  
of Converse  
at the Santa  
Monica Pier.  
They dropped off  
the dock while  
your roommate told  
me that Zoltar  
wasn't real.  
He never offered  
his flip flops.  
I made him  
watch the movie  
*Big* in his bed.

So here's your package,  
Peter. Oh, I know,  
it's a sorry excuse  
for soaking in  
my obsession in sucking  
his as though  
my mouth were  
the shoe and he  
was the perfect fit.

## HOT TOPIC Medley

1.13.2010

Last week, I wanted to be a band boy with a huge dick. Another reason I ought to quit HOT TOPIC.

Other reasons:

1. I need to stop buying skull shirts.
2. My co-worker Maly told me my hips were big.
3. I cry at work.

2.16.2010

I can't pull off these skinny jeans like the rest of my HOT TOPIC co-workers. I don't fit. But my skinny jeans were so easy for Peter's roommate to pull off. I know it was just a bunch of *Hocus Pocus*. How could I escape the embarrassment of his question about a condom mid-HOT make out? *A virgin lit the candle!* Dick limp. The black flame candle burnt out faster than it was lit. I struggled to stretch the jeans back up my thighs.

This isn't my scene, this isn't my scene, this isn't

## HOW TO MAKE A SCENE + FUCK OFF IF YOU THINK THIS IS EMBARRASSING

Pick one or more facial piercings:

- ( ) Snake bites—two lip piercings placed on the bottom; hoops encouraged.
- ( ) Septum—bull ring in the middle nose cartilage. Black jewelry a must.
- ( ) Bridge—not the card game grandma played. Between the eyes.

(Or don't because Dad will stop paying for car and apartment)

Spend three hundred dollars at Salon Za Za for purple hair (raccoon-tailed peekaboo optional at additional cost). Half-ass the goth look. Dilute *Nightmare Before Christmas* merch with ruffles, neon necklaces, and hair bows.

It breaks my heart how spoiled I am. Give me a Xan.

## JUST SURRENDER JUST SURRENDER JUST SURRENDER

A poster of the band members Just Surrender hung above my bed. Every night I looked up at it. The members coated in stubble, shoulder-length brown hair, and lip piercings (HOT), sip red martinis with cigarettes behind their ears. The poster reads: *We're in like sin*. The one on the far left looked like Peter's roommate. I counted in my head under my comforter. One band member, two band members, three band members...

*A giraffe-sized speculum runs after me as I run after Peter's roommate who runs from me. As the speculum gains speed, I jump in a nearby bathtub to hide underwater. I close my eyes and count: one band member, two band members, three band members. I open my eyes. The speculum peers above me.*

As I fell to the bedroom floor, my sheets waved like a white flag.

3.01.10

I keep thinking of Peter's roommate. What was it about him that made me so attached? And are those qualities what I really want? He's cool and in a band and has piercings. HOT TOPIC male model. Okay. Who am I kidding? Of course I want to be like him. I am obsessed with transformation. My pants are too big when I rise and fit right when I sit.

NOTE TO SELF: SHOWS ARE CALLED SHOWS. NEVER CONCERTS.

4.04.2010

Did I have another dream about Peter's roommate? Fuck that. Let's switch topics. I want snake bites. Whatever about Daddy's money.

I HAVE...

- \*Kissed the prom king
- \*Sucked my HOT TOPIC manager's dick
- \*Punched the core king

FROM FIRST TO LAST WITH VANITY

I paint my face to appear porcelain, first.  
Last, I apply wing eyeliner past my brows.

From the moment we first met, I found  
vanity. But like us, looks never last.

NOTE TO SELF: I DON'T WANT TO MISS YOU TERRIBLY, AND "NO TITS IN THE PIT"  
IS BULLSHIT

4.20.2010

Went to the show D.R.U.G.S. at Blue Moose Tap House. I pranced to the merch table and asked Matt Good if he was Matt Good. He slumped his shoulders and said he was too sober "for this." Dick. I offered him a Jameson shot. And even after the shot, he told me, "Don't throw up, kid." Am I a kid? Like. God. Damn. I'm. 21. He's 28? 29? I ordered way too many shots after that.

The End.



Just kidding. After the show, I walked up to Matt Good and called him a douchebag. I was SO PLEASED. I chatted up the lead singer of Hit the Lights. I told him I listened to their song in the mornings “Her Eyes Say Yes But the Restraining Order Says No.” He called me a creep. And what does that make him? I threw up in the bar bathroom. The graffiti read, “Band boys think you’re disgusting.”

I made out with the lead singer of Hit the Lights. I don’t know his name hahahha.

XXX Hostess Cupcake: Her Sweetest Comeback

Oh, boy, I know  
I am not your  
future, only

a piece of cream  
filling you want  
to get

inside. So tonight,  
ignore my  
nutrition

facts: I'm better  
than the Debbie  
who claims devil

status.  
She's a square.  
And that bitch

Betty Crocker?  
She makes you  
do all the work.

So what if  
I'm a deep fried  
mess topped with dry

frosting loops? Swallow  
whole little old  
packaged me.

I'll savor  
every moan as I rot  
your guts out.

### Three Cheers for Possession

After the three spirits rejected therapy  
and hid the sage from me, I released a bath bomb  
to explode their collective conspiracy.  
They countered by turning the bath cold and bubbly.  
I took a sip of the water—it was champagne! I gulped the rest

of the bath. *Cheers!* In unison, the spirits said, *Let's go  
to a bar. Let's go.* At The Alpine, we all four spun on one barstool—  
then ordered four Moscow Mules. The bartender asked why.  
*I'm drinking for four tonight, Jimmy.* He told me to stop  
the crazy talk. The ghouls frowned: *Don't you know,*

*you can't tell?* I chugged the mules, one by one,  
then pounded my fist on the bar like a frat boy.  
*Four more shots for me and my bros.* Jimmy shook  
his head. Cut off, I begged the spirits to stay,  
as they threw themselves up, up, and away.

### THREE

*...the past devour[s] the present—and the younger generation.*

Gunnar Hansen, *Chain Saw Confidential*

Self-Portrait as Leatherface

*Take off his mask and you find nothing—featureless skin  
or even nothingness itself.*

—Gunnar Hansen, *Chain Saw Confidential*

At the Slaughter Residence,  
I cling to hooks in the basement.  
My fear elevates the collection  
of sledges, hammers, and cleavers  
to more than tools: expectations  
that I can't reach. They dim  
in the cloudy light anyhow.

Outside in the fenced pasture,  
cows huddle with free-range.  
Crops grow. Most days,  
I can't get out of bed. The frame  
of bones is very comfortable.

But I can't stand myself, can't even  
finish my skin dioramas;  
I eat brain cheese by the gallon.

Down the hill, the dry ravine  
poses as proof for the deceased.  
How can a body of water become so big,  
and then hold nothing? Sometimes,

I dream up a new face for myself,  
one that doesn't feel  
like a mask.

## Leatherface and Me: A Study



## LEATHERFACE INSTRUCTIONS

**Destination:** Vaudeville Mews on 4<sup>th</sup> Street, Des Moines.

**Mask of choice:** Killer. Hot glue tissue and paper towels. Coat with mummy-colored pastels.

**Body:** Pretty Woman. Collared crop top, scalloped tie, short apron, Spanx shorts, pigs' blood, fishnets, and vintage black boots.

**Accessories:** Licensed *Texas Chain Saw Massacre* chain saw and meat hook from The Theatrical Shop. Bobby pins.

1. Hike up fishnet tights.
2. Rip the tag off the plastic meat hook.
3. Lick plastic meat hook.
4. Shimmy on Spanx.
5. Head over apron.
6. Pig blood splatter.

Drink lots of champagne. Order a Lyft. Put on the mask. Once you arrive at Mews, hit a dickhead you used to hook up with in the face with the meat hook while you pretend to dance.

FOUR

*Tell me, will you stay or will you run away?*

Whitney Houston, "Run to You"



## Grave Vows

### I.

My groom would not take me to *take me* in the churchyard. He preferred our mortal bed. So I went to our grave instead. Without escort, I snuck from our little house, and crept around the churchyard walls. Oh, how I wanted to play with the dead! First I traced my fingers over just a few epitaphs: *At rest, Remember me with laughter, Our crown jewel, Gone to glory, Remember me*. How grand, the grooves of loss! Crypt cement churned into drool that sucked my fingers. Where was the harm in a frivolous encounter? If only they could drain my salt and rind of flesh. Still I dared not let my ring fall off.

Why do the engravings always say “Wife of?” Never  
Husband of. Wife of. Wife  
Of. Wife of Wife of  
Wife of

With my finger, I scratched the epitaph onto our headstone  
until there was nothing left but the bone:

*Ad finem fidelis*

### II.

By morning, my groom came looking for me! “What do you think of our new home?” I asked. He tried to flee but his foot slid in the melted mortar. The dead always catch up to the living. Always, my Husband of.

## Lake Cabin Driftwood, Baby

As my husband watches, I write thank-you notes in the dark. Thank you for the money to pay our bills. Thank you for the towels, so we can dry ourselves. Since Aunt Mary did not pay the power bill, she will sell this cabin for half its worth. At midnight, the temperature drops below thirty. We light the fireplace. The dim mantle, toy drum, Goldie's ashes, phallic driftwood. So close. The driftwood can catch fire. Still feeling cold, we kiss. He inflates the air mattress as I watch. We fall asleep on trapped air that pushes our bodies to the middle. Finally warm, he drifts into snoring. The mattress deflates by morning. Should we bring anything home? Maybe the driftwood, something we can dress each anniversary, as if it were ours.

## My Husband's Hair

At restaurants, waiters ask,  
*What would you ladies like to drink?*

I grab his hair, *That's my husband!*  
Then yank it.

At coffee shops, baristas gush,  
*I love your hair; it's so thick!*

Thanks, I say, all smiles,  
as if his hair grew on my scalp.

Back at home, I try to nurse my hair  
with lumpy creams; I plot harvesting  
his hair to weave a wig to wear  
or sell on the black market.

At night, he picks at his split ends  
in bed, while I sleep next to

the hair of my dreams.

## Gross, Pale, and Temporary

Married six months,  
and naturally, an umbilical  
hernia forms. One night,  
tired of washing dishes,  
I break from soaping a casserole pan  
to return to my

temporary tattoos.  
I peel each plastic layer to strip  
it from the paper. The eyeball  
I lay on the counter  
to give it a better view,  
pull the ghoul and hang it  
by the window  
where light passes through the ghoul  
like the transparency of my fate,  
then place the bat's wings  
on the roof of my mouth  
so it can feel at home.

After, I wet a paper towel.  
I slowly shimmy down  
my oversized gym shorts to slide  
the soon-to-be fading ghoul  
to my abdomen, then the rest:  
the bat will soon fly away,  
the eyeball blind. My pale  
canvas prematurely bloats  
in grief.

But Lord, I'm So Forlorn, I Just Can't See No Unicorn

I.

The world is a bath I want to drown in, yet I haven't  
joined the unicorns in their nonexistence.

Husband, you found me chin deep asleep in the bath  
with vomit in my hair as if it were conditioner.

I hope my pale thighs shivering from the champagne  
binge resembled the shifting shine of my opal

engagement ring. Or, at best, the curled hip  
of a unicorn in rest, pink translucence. But I'll never know.

II.

Did the unicorns care when Noah  
and his ark left them to drown?

According to The Irish Rovers song "The Unicorn,"  
they were having too much fun to notice the water rising.

In the plot of *The Last Unicorn*, the unicorns hide  
in the water from the Red Bull. Did you

know unicorns invented Roman bathhouses, thousands of  
meters, the size of my delusions?

Then, centuries later, unicorns patented  
the hot tub in 1967.

III.

Did you hear unicorns are also skilled psychotherapists?  
I have talked with them in the bath for a couple of years

now. I told them how I kept my virginity for 23 years  
all for you, and they applaud me with their hooves.

Unicorns adore virginity. That's how I found friendship  
with them, despite their professional demeanors.

But not anymore, since we married.

## Endnotes

The preface title “a Departure” is in homage to La Dispute’s song “a Departure.”

“As Punishment for Writing About My Mother, Whitney Houston Plays in my Head Eternally”: Whitney Houston’s lyrics from the songs “The Greatest Love of All” and “I Have Nothing” are referenced in italics.

“Rosary Casino Party” includes a quote from the film *Forrest Gump*: “It felt like something just jumped up and bit me!”

The italicized language in “Slow and in Control Townies” is from the workout video *8 Minute Buns*.

“HOT TOPIC Medley”: “A virgin lit the candle” is a line from the 1993 movie *Hocus Pocus* movie. A song from the band From First to Last entitled “Note to Self” is used as parody.

“Self-Portrait as Leatherface”: the word “Slaughter” refers to the original surname of Leatherface’s family. In later sequels, the family’s last name changes to Sawyer.

“XXX Hostess Cupcake: Her Sweetest Comeback”: part of the Hostess company tagline “The Sweetest Comeback” is used for the title.

The poem title “But Lord, I’m So Forlorn, I Just Can’t See No Unicorn” is a lyric from the Irish Rovers’ song “The Unicorn.”

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## Vita

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