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## **New Bruises**

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New Bruises

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

Katelyn Aquilo

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## Abstract

The following manuscript is a collection of poetry based on experiences. Religious hypocrisy and abuse thread throughout the collection with both first hand experiences and fictional ones. It is divided into three parts: the hometown, the bodily abuse, and then, finally, the religion.

Keywords: home; religion; abuse; experience; hypocrisy.

## The Voices

“The voice you hear when you read to yourself  
is the clearest voice: you speak it  
speaking to you.”

— Thomas Lux, “The Voice You Hear When You Read Silently”

I often think about Thomas Lux in my hours of need. I invoke God, His name, and then Lux. In my youth, I had often given up on myself. I sometimes still give up on the power of words, especially mine. I think, “How can I stand where *they* have stood? People like Shakespeare and Bishop and other greats—and even some greats still living, such as Ocean Vuong and Andrea Gibson, and so many more. How can I call myself ‘poet’? In these moments, I think too much on the term, “poet,” and not enough about “poetry.” These two forces constantly pull me, and my writing possesses a tension between me as a poet and the poems as poetry. My voice, my poet-voice, wants to overcome the art-voice to blurt out anything to get my point across; other times, the art wants to stifle my voice. But this tension drives my poetry as I seek a balance.

As I entered graduate school, I began reading Dan Beachy-Quick. I have met Beachy-Quick twice and interviewed him for *Rain Taxi*. One thing I admire about him is that he refuses to publish a book of poems without a story. His “one-off” poems, as I call them, about his personal life or his observations only appear in journals and magazines. To hear him openly say he does not think his personal poems belong in any work seemed weird at first. That’s all I write! On the other hand, he sees each book as a project. His book *Shields & Shards & Stitches & Songs* contains poems he has manipulated from Achilles’ shield by way of blacking out different each version of each poem. I did try this

themed approach once in undergrad. I considered writing a book of poems devoted to elevators to include conversations in and around elevators, exploring drama found there. I have never returned to those poems. My voice wants to come out NOW! Getting to know Beachy-Quick's work better has, in a way, inspired my work to be even more personal than before. His voice is different from mine. In addition to the realization that my poem process is different than Beachy-Quick's, I also recognize my innate desire to be loud. I am not a loud person, but shy, unassuming, small, and most of all, non-confrontational. However, raised as a female in the South as well as being a part of an abusive, controlling relationship has made me feel cooped up. I want to SCREAM. I want my poems to hit readers like bricks; I want my desperation, anger, or passion to spill out. I play around with my text for this reason, sometimes with what I like to call "yelly" words, such as all-capitalized words. They creep into poems. Usually I'll cut them out, but my first goal when writing a poem is to *get the word on the page*. One example is my "Tally Marks" poem where I use capitalized words because the speaker is shocked and outraged at her life turning into sticks around her. My poet-voice wants to critique the caged lifestyle a woman faces when she marries a man. The art-voice, however, was not included in the original draft. My voice-vomit is the only voice present. When revising that poem, I needed to reflect on the poem as a *poem*, and give it space to be art.

Speaking of voice, in 2005 Hurricane Katrina flooded my home and forever changed my voice as a writer. As a resident of St. Bernard Parish just outside New Orleans, I lost my home, possessions, and clothes. What I most lamented losing at that time was my vast collection of books. I lost my entire *Nancy Drew* series, but luckily I evacuated with my *Harry Potter* books. I had the most beautiful print copy of Anderson's

*The Secret Garden* with its deep-red velvet cover and gold tinted pages that I lost as well. I had read the book in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade before I knew all the words; its implications I would later learn had been lost on me. That didn't matter at the time because I enjoyed reading about an ugly girl who discovered her new world within the confines of loneliness. My self-loathing, even at that young age, was akin to hers. But Katrina broke me. As an overweight, intelligent child with a few close friends, I wouldn't say I was bullied, but I wasn't invited to everyone's birthday party. I went to a small school, so I was at the top of the class there. It was easy to be! When Katrina forced me to another school I was in a bigger pond and no longer the smartest kid. Not only was I the new girl, but my peers mocked my dialect. One teacher there told me the hurricane had happened to cleanse the area of "trash." Like me. This bolstered a pride for my hometown even with its many flaws I now see as an adult. My hometown pride is a part of my poet-voice. My poem, "Gerald's Donuts" reflects my pride through the parish's local donut diner, an establishment integral to my home. With poems pertaining to my hometown, the art-voice of my brain finds it easy to wrestle my poet-voice. I can easily balance the word-vomit and the poetic using dialect, alliteration, and metaphor.

While my poet-voice overpowers some poems, other times my art-voice conquers. Some poems in this collection do not directly involve me, but their stories have touched me. "For the Okinawa Neighbor," for example, depicts a coworker's story. From the few details I know, I think of the story as breaking the barriers of language. Even though the neighbor and speaker don't speak the same language, they eventually communicate as the neighbor helps the speaker get to the hospital to deliver her first child. In a new country isolated by more than just language, the speaker has a special connection with her



neighbor through this. I stole this story and made it into a poem. My art-voice almost overtook the poem completely at first. It was so muddled with metaphors and vague imagery that readers had a hard time comprehending the poem. I needed to insert my poet-voice into it. I had to give it a piece of myself as if the story had happened to me so that readers could relate to it.

Likewise, as I aged I began to see how people I loved were racist and homophobic. I befriended people not like me: people of color, Muslims, LGBTQ members. My extensive study of Christianity in college led me to question my faith as well as my religious practices in this regard. I wanted to pick it apart to see the flaws. Not only did this influence my writing, but it influenced my ideas about poetry. My confusion led me to read anything by someone not like me: for instance, Langston Hughes, Jean Toomer, and Gwendolyn Brooks. I also read the book *The Help*. I sought out homoerotic interpretations of Shakespeare sonnets (specifically the Fair Youth ones) as well as gay critiques of Robert Herrick's work, such as, "The Vine" and "To the Virgins." Herrick's work seems about woman, but the poet never married, and many criticisms attempt to see through his hyperhetero-eroticism. I didn't want to mimic those experiences but look at how people unlike me portrayed their raw experiences. My poem "The Color" expresses the racist tendencies I have had from my upbringing I wish to alter or abolish. The speaker is a made-up speaker, but much of that poem is taken from things I've observed around me. My poet-voice is there. These realizations about my ideals made me remember that in high school, I read young adult trilogies and series like *Harry Potter* and *Hunger Games*. In *Harry Potter*, the namesake of the series had to save the world from an evil wizard. In *Hunger Games*, Katniss Everdeen had to overcome and defeat a

corrupt government only to discover the new government as corrupt as the old one. These characters wanted to make a just world. These books, fantasy stories, portrayed a very black and white world with little focus on any grey. I could see the grey around me begging to be noticed since the literature I had read did not. So, I noticed it gave it a voice through my poetry. I used my poet-voice to piece together my own experiences, experiences of actual neighbors, and certain family members' actions and thoughts to deliver a speaker who is racist and elitist.

Before I even began to see the hypocrisy around me, though, I was in an abusive relationship throughout high school and the beginning of college. I needed a way to show problematic situations without directly condemning them because I loved my homophobic boyfriend and my racist grandparents. These were grey areas those fantasy stories just couldn't handle. I needed poetry. I wrote so much blank verse to distance myself from trauma I still feel iambic pentameter rumbling in my bones. Being fluent in Latin and having translated Ovid, Catullus, and Virgil, I enjoy meter and the nuances it can provide in poetry. Catullus manipulates meter depending on the seriousness of his subject matter. He has many ironic, bitterly sarcastic poems that are in more playful meters than dactylic hexameter, which is reserved for epics typically.

My traumas were too painful to approach directly, so I chose vague metaphors in traditional meters like iambic pentameter and iambic tetrameter as well as attempting to adopt the dactylic hexameter in English. This is when my poems-as-art-voice became the most powerful. Choosing the best diction was not as important as the structure. My undergraduate professor John Biguenet once told me that before he can truly approach a difficult subject, he must compose the poem in iambic pentameter to distance himself

from it. It allowed him to take a step back after writing and then to manipulate the poem to bring in emotion. On his advice, I wrote terrible sonnets and dreadful villanelles, but soon I discovered Thomas Lux. I thought he was the perfect mix of performance and page poet. His poet-voice never overpowers his poems as art. They are both in balance. His rendition of “And Still it Comes” haunts me still. His readings were beautiful and exciting but never lacking on the page. I strive, still, to write poems this way.

During this time I also began to explore ideas from my theology courses. I consider myself a Catholic who believes in the betterment of the world through Christ’s teachings. However, I recognize that much of our doctrine is manmade and serves only the Vatican, so I want to draw attention to issues within the Church. Being Catholic doesn’t mean I don’t see the problems of our doctrine, which can be homophobic, misogynist, and elitist. Rather than absolving my beliefs, I want my poetry to hold Catholicism accountable. I want to abide by what Jesus believed it could be. I don’t think the Vatican is inherently evil, but many problems need voicing. Ignorance and hypocrisy are different beasts entirely. My friend’s unpublished poem, “God Baking Cakes” inspired me to write my God as mine. In her poem, God is in His kitchen baking the cakes of humanity. The poem alludes to God’s acceptance of all people, including homosexuals and transsexuals, as well as his sadness with violence in the world. I realized I could counter the traditional ways people depict God with the way I imagine Him. My God cares about character and morality over following the Bible strictly. On the other hand, my Mary Magdalene poem exposes ignorance I have found in the Church. Similarly, “Trinitas,” too, exposes an ignorance that many Catholics hold regarding the

Holy Spirit. My poet-voice uses my own feelings about my faith to expose these ignorant ideas.

As I continue to write, I learn better ways shape my voices. I can vomit at first, but I then need to clean up my diction, grammar, and language for the reader. I can read anything aloud and make it sound amazing; the goal is to invite the reader in even when I am not standing there yelling in her face. I need my poet-voice to stop fighting with my poems-as-art voice so much.

I.

## Gerald's Donuts

a small diner in St. Bernard Parish outside New Orleans.

The mom n pop joint has  
two locations in my small town:  
one up da road, one down,  
the only directions  
in Da Parish. We're regulars,

and the diner woman knows  
my order: two chocolate covered glazed  
with sprinkles. Her accent so thick  
I could fry that and make a donut out of it.  
Everybody got a regular order there, even

before Katrina hit and sank  
Da Parish twenty feet deep.  
We all wondered: who  
coming back? You?  
Me? We done?

After the refinery  
poisoned flood waters with oil,  
seeping into houses, making  
em useless, Gerald's came back.  
The sweet taste of home  
we hadda rebuild.

So let me tell you something,  
Krispy Kreme and Dunkin Donuts.  
Your chains ain't welcome  
here. We don't want some machine  
donut

saturated in fake glaze.  
We want home-grown. We want  
our own blood in our donuts.

## Oh Say, Can You See?

as you walk away, the 30 of you, by the evening's fading light  
all 30 of you bat-swinging baseball-cap-wearing guttural-Adam's-apple-trembling  
cup-repositioning *boys*  
when the game is over and you proudly march  
when *clink clink clink clink clink* of cleats is not the only sound you hear  
after the clicking cleats and closing chatter cease  
when he drops his bulging baseball bag with a rattle, a clatter, Death shaking his chain  
into the trunk

when there is an applause *CLAP* for the hand-to-skin performance  
when the back of his catcher's hand catches my flesh  
as his fingers shackle my wrists against the car  
as you start your own cars, clamber the doors, shut  
out our seeing-stars bursting through air

even as you blast your radios so you won't hear us  
oh, I know  
oh, I know you see by the daylight's final gleam  
but still you just keep going.

## A Neighborhood As Told by Paint Colors

### *Double Latte*

I learned a smidge of Spanish so I could speak  
to her. Mathalda broke  
a lamp in my son's room. Said I need  
not charge her for the week's work.  
It was awfully nice of her to offer repayment  
for her mistake.  
I didn't call her back. I didn't answer her texts.  
However, it seems no cleaning  
lady could do the job just  
like dear, dear Mathalda. Just  
the other day it rained so hard I had to sit  
in my pearl-esque Chevy Tahoe until it all stopped  
because *I'd* forgotten my umbrella that day,  
and I'd not risk my perfectly ironed hair  
in this Louisiana wet. The calm came. I dashed  
for the door with such voracity I felt my wan cheeks  
flush! Mathalda was cleaning her heart out, bless her.  
The vacuum roared, and it muffled the door's closure  
as I slipped my shoes off. I couldn't risk  
marring her hard work! My floors looked  
immaculate. Granted, Mathalda always arrived  
*exactly twelve minutes* late, but the state  
of my tiles made up for her tardiness.  
She didn't hear me come in.  
Good gosh, she just  
about leapt out her SKIN  
when she saw me!  
She called me *fantasma*! She pointed  
and called me a ghost! I joked  
with her that *I wasn't that white* and asked her  
if she had gone to any of the other eight  
houses she cleans on my street. We're a *gated*  
neighborhood, so it'd be best if she got us all done on the same day.



*Saddle Up*

It's either Jim or Ronnie, but I can't recall currently.  
My neighbor down the street has a real good gardener.  
Real good. He's black.  
Ms. Dawn leaves exactly three drinks  
on her mailbox for him: one red Gatorade, one blue  
one, and one cold water. My Lord,  
he is something else. I see him when I go  
on my jogs. He's there at least twice a week. The Louisiana sun  
coats his slick skin with a glistening gloss  
like nothing you've seen, and he seems  
*very* nice. I even wave at him sometimes! Goodness,  
I feel awful about forgetting his name. I swear  
it's either Jim or Ronnie. I know Carol, Cindy,  
Michelle, and Carol L. all use him.  
I wonder, is he looking for another house to *garden*?

*Stonebriar*

Our best friends in the neighborhood  
are the Rodriguez's down the street.  
Unfriendly neighbors wall my house from all  
sides. The Friday night cookouts? We never  
get invited. It's rude! So I go down  
to Ms. Rodriguez's house to drink a Long  
Island, and we gossip about the rest  
of our neighbors. God, Wanda had the weight-loss  
surgery and looks crack-whore thin. We think  
she looked much better before with meat on her bones.  
She's healthier, but her arms are still flabby.  
Ms. Rodriguez, an older Cuban woman who refused  
to teach her children Spanish because  
in America,  
we speak English.  
She's right. I've never heard her speak  
her own language, and I've never told her I know some phrases.  
It's Fall time, and everyone around here tries to out-decorate each other  
with Harvest décor. Oh, the cutest pilgrims and Indians litter  
the neighborhood! I just *love* it. Ms. Rodriguez has this *thing*  
she does to keep her stress in check: she mows  
her own lawn.  
Imagine that! I could never.  
I don't think my noodle-arms could push  
a lawn mower! That's my husband's job.  
But Ms. Rodriguez does it, and I have to say,  
she does a wonderful job with her manicured  
lawn. She doesn't like decorating,  
so this time of year she hires her Honduran  
men to come with their long ladders for her tall trees.  
They labor so strenuously under the blazing sun,  
cooked to a golden brown by the time they leave!  
Ms. Rodriguez watches from the comfort of her carport's  
shade, instructing with a wagging finger where  
they should move a giant pumpkin, where a brown  
ribbon can be tied just *right*. When it gets colder  
in December, they'll be back. It'll be near  
freezing by then, but they'll be back.  
You can be sure of it.  
They come back every year for her.

*Bred Brown*

We have new neighbors.  
They're not like  
us. They moved into the Doctor's House.  
A doctor used to live in the mansion,  
and I've only ever *heard* about the interior.  
I would give anything to see the décor  
inside. I try to make nice and wave  
at the young man whenever I'm outside  
jogging, making sure my chestnut hair whips  
ever so lightly in the wind  
as I glisten. Southern women glisten,  
you see; we don't sweat. I wonder  
if our new neighbors know that all houses here,  
with roofs as tall as pines,  
and among the stucco white  
brick, that all our pretty houses don our yards  
with welcoming waves from St. Bernard  
Highway. I wonder if they know that were they to tread deeper,  
into the thicket,  
that they'd see  
just how much color  
it takes  
to groom our neighborhood.

## Tuesday Art Lesson

We head outside making hearts  
for a sick teacher. Their tiny fingers  
have never drawn

hearts before. The hearts are lopsided.  
One asks, *Ms. Katelyn, what is that  
in the sky?*

as she points at a greyish-white  
not two miles from us,  
ink-limbs reaching into clouds then splaying like hair.

I don't right away answer  
and help the children  
cut their hearts.

*My daddy works at the smoke. So does mine! And my mommy too!*  
Mrs. Dooly my colleague replies,  
*The refinery, which pays for your tuition,*

*your house, and probably your toys,  
but now, kids, let's look  
at our weather chart.*

*What climate do we have here?*  
One student chimes, *but what do we color  
our weather today? It's not cloudy*

*so we can't color that square,  
but I can't see the sky!*

I finally speak.  
Color the sunny square.

## Racetrak Chalmette Has the Best Icees

1

My icee routine is simple. After tough weeks, and there are many in high school, I buy an icee on Friday. I walk into the Racetrak. I tongue the icee lid as it excretes coke liquid through the top, rim the sides clean, then stick my straw in. Let it push more out. Lick again.

My icee routine is sacred. Nothing can ruin it. Chalmette Racetrak has the best icees.

2

Nothing can ruin my icee Routine. Noting except a  
*Hey baby, how ya doin?*  
*Ain't seen you in a lowng ass time.*

An old customer from my summer job, but no window to close on him here. No coworker to pass him off to. With little barrier, his arm snakes around my waist. He's come To fill up.  
(Racetrak does have cheap gas.)

*What ya been doin? Y'all all okay?*  
*I seen you got a icee—*  
*Racetrak Chalmette has the best icees.*  
I am pulled. My hands are pink from groping the icee cup. The straw sucked so hard. My cheeks burning. I suck, and I Suck. I suck.

*Best icees in da parish, Racetrak.  
When the machine workin yeah the best.  
When coke broke, I get mountain dew.  
Thas my routine.*

He asks my age. When I  
am silent he laughs with his friends.

*Aw, man, bruh, you know he from down  
da road when he walkin roun  
here with a hunnit dolla bill and no  
choos on. Haha, right bay?*

He pays for my stuff with a rustle  
of green from inside his wallet.  
That icee has frozen my mouth  
into perpetual sucking O  
so I can keep it occupied.  
I know he knows my age.

3

I say nothing. I continue.  
I continue to suck. I suck  
and say nothing until I escape  
to lean  
and press my forehead  
against my steering wheel until  
I cry to myself.

I know you *know* my age.

## For the Okinawa Neighbor

I had never seen such a thick coat of snow  
before. My husband was on base,  
but me? Sheltered in our small  
home in the Okinawa suburbs.

The first day in my new Japanese  
residence, you had helped me  
with my groceries. You did not  
speak. You did not know my language.

A later day when the snow-coat  
blanketed our neighborhood, and my belly  
bloated in pregnancy decided to expel  
the occupant, like a lost duckling

I waddled outside. My car, fortified by snow  
like a multi-walled cell membrane,  
proved impenetrable to tugging  
with my cells ready to spring

forth. I wondered if my husband  
could feel it, too: our fetus lurch.  
You, in a cruel  
game of Pictionary, attempted

giving directions: *follow the bus as it makes  
a path in the snow for you*. I couldn't get it.  
*Drive*. You kept saying one word in English. *Drive*.  
You labored for hours as you unpacked my car.

As the bus shuddered down  
the street, my feet carried  
me to my car's driver's seat, soaked  
in my juices. And I followed the bus.

It was 1993 when I gave birth  
to my first child, Amber, there.  
I do not know your name,  
but I remember you often, every time  
I look at her. I remember your crude green  
bus drawing. *Drive*, you said. *Drive*.

## For Thomas Lux

“Lux sit.” – Genesis 1:3  
Let there be light.

And still, it came.  
An uphill bullet train full of black smoke and empty milk bottles.  
Dust bowls, cyclones of them, pumping into tires, nailed.  
Rain clouds clogging catchers, houses hacking up debris.  
It came faster  
When you were on your back,  
Huffing.  
When you were tasting your heart on your tongue,  
Red lace regurgitating.  
It came, brutish.  
It came, sudden.  
Apt.  
Anything but smooth.  
It breathed through its mouth,  
Which was three holes in one.  
It breathed like a vacuum  
Sucking in its belly.  
It dementored you.

*Lux, sit.*  
Relax.  
You are in bliss.



## Expectations From My Ex For Our Future Children

Don't you dare bring home a negro  
or I will belt buckle pop;  
I'll snap you with a steel-like blow.

Your grandpa hit us, materialized a white glow,  
stars in our eyes from the buckle top.  
He would say, *don't dare bring home a negro.*

Don't stray too far out the closet, though,  
and if you choose the gay lifestyle, stop—  
I'll snap you with a steel-like blow.

Obedience: You—all of you—must show  
total respect, or I'll *show* you with my fist top.  
I'll snap! You'll feel my blow of steel.

My catholic children, fear the Lord's plough,  
able to pluck you right from the crop.  
I echo, don't dare bring home a negro.

Pray for forgiveness, pray the Holy Spirit may flow  
from the graces of above, that you not be homo!  
Don't you dare bring home a negro  
or I'll snap you with my steel-like blow.

## A Reflection About Love From A Poet's Youth

*She* was your world, at first,  
Her laughter like bell-chimes,  
Your making out during *Dark Knight*

She was *your* world, next,  
Your Adam's apple bulging,  
Her body rubbed raw at your insistence

She *was* your world, last of all,  
Fearing the men at the mall  
She sashays even now, navigating  
The least man-ridden path she can find.

**II.**

## Losing My Hair

*I'm cutting off your prom hair!*

Brittany told me years  
ago snipping some inches

how weird to think  
of hair as time  
split ends a record  
of straightening done for dances

*refreshing*

I thought  
to begin again  
to have shed the dead

*normal. normal to lose it.*

75 pounds down and I  
lose my hair  
make mounds in the drain

Mary my dietician said

*normal*      *it's normal* to lose  
strand by strand

by strand with my sweat beads  
and shower bouquets  
the drain  
down

*God damn it, Katelyn.*

Dad uses a hanger  
to pull the dead slug of my hair from the drain  
slug, like the one that lived under my ex's arm

*normal* she said as I  
could feel my crown  
slipping, slipping  
down

And that other time after a night  
out gone snipped  
and that other time  
with cum from the night

shedding like skin  
a fresh raw  
left  
75 pounds

shed, my dead cells, past  
self, nesting when I wash clothes  
and the fresh raw  
shedding the memories of his touch

down the drain.  
Have I gained a loss,  
a needed one,  
in my attempt to lose?

## Showers Alone

Horror movie solo showers:

I take showers alone.  
The rain's attempt to break  
into my home bangs and clatters  
the windows and does not bother  
me; I steam  
my bathroom. I shave before  
dark because not enough  
light pours into my shower  
for me to see. I always miss  
my knee. I tap  
my razor against the sink  
every few seconds  
to observe tiny hairs drift  
around the sink-pool.

I do not notice the man  
behind the curtain. How  
do they get in here, the bad guys?  
No one knows. Yet  
waiting like a trapdoor spider  
for me to tear aside  
curtains to step in,  
naked, to slice  
my neck meat. Oh how  
sad to die by the hand of  
another, not my own.  
Always, I've wanted to go  
romantically.

Real solo showers:

You are not here right now.  
I masturbate in the shower.  
I've stopped shaving.  
The light above my sink  
illuminates my pimpled  
skin, unwashed and picked.

## Love Note To Nic Cage

I choose you./And I'll choose you,/Over and over/And over.  
Without pause,/Without a doubt,/In a heart beat,  
I'll keep/Choosing you.

-Poem Hunter, when Googling "love note poem"

When I first saw you  
on a movie screen  
in *National Treasure*,  
the leather coat torch swinging  
clever thief of the *Declaration*,

big and glowing,  
I knew I loved you.  
I loved your receding hairline,  
large forehead,  
and John Wayne gait.

Later still, I watched your face  
change places  
with John Travolta's in an old movie  
I'd only just discovered.  
You were mad then, Nic, mad!

You hijacked a plane from a hijacker  
and I thought,  
*Oh, I like em bad,*  
*but only a little bad*  
*til they show they're surely*  
*the protagonist.* I knew  
I would marry you, then.

We were so close when you lived, briefly,  
here in New Orleans in 2007.  
Right, Nic? I would have lived with you  
in LaLaurie Manor until you moved out,  
the failed horror novelist.

Horrific, that separation; we've never known  
what it's like to be together.  
The closest we've been  
is when I bought a Nic Cage eyeshadow  
called "Nic Cage Raking Leaves  
on a Brisk October Evening"

and secretly I knew it contained bits  
of you—skin and hair. Those kiss marks you hate  
on your tomb stone in St. Louis Cemetery,  
they are all mine!  
In *Chihuahua*, Tarte Cosmetics.

And yes, this eyeshadow sucks!  
Sucks so bad it smudges, leaving my eyes looking like a raccoon's.  
And yes, you voiced Superman  
in that awful Teen Titans remake  
and played Noir Spiderman in *Spiderverse*,  
but you always loved Luke Cage (your namesake) more.

Still, I love you, Nic.  
Who said love is easy?



## Ten Steps To a Tidy Household

No matter how many times you mop, scrub, and clean, the everyday stench and stains of life prevail. As long as you cook, play, and well, *live*, they'll win. So here are tips to keep your house looking tidy as ever!

1. In a respectable pose, scour at the messy living room and the messy couch.
2. While you dust take pictures of all family members (kids, the husband, both of you) so you don't break them and pack them away. Get rid of that clutter, clutter, clutter!
3. Just dust everything! Ignore your allergies! *Bless you!*
4. Mop next! Well, vacuum, then mop. Those neat little piles of dust won't stand a chance!
5. That white stain on the cushion? Don't worry about it! Scrub it until you want to chop your arms off!
6. If the stain doesn't disappear, shampoo it with toxic fabric shampoo.
7. Discover the panties hidden between two couch cushions; the pink thong may not be yours, so promptly throw it away and ignore the implications.
8. Once you've abused your muscles to get that stain out, reconsider the panties.
9. Now to take real good action against this mess! Using a convenient kitchen utensil, stab your husband when he returns from work. That way, there's no need to ask questions.
10. Drag his bloodied body into the living room between the couch and coffee table; he'll make an excellent conversation starter accent-rug, don't you think? It's recycling! We love a tidy queen!

Once you've done these things, you can marvel at your awesome skills, lady! So take time to sip some Merlot as you watch your favorite Netflix flick. Lock your children in their bedrooms to achieve the ultimate alone time. Rest your feet on your new throw-rug. Your visitors will thrill at your skills!

## Tally Marks

I am sixteen and in love, and I tally  
mark each time  
my boyfriend and I tell each other “I love you.”  
I tally and tally until—

Tally marks leap off  
the page and surround me! Cage  
me  
in a prison. Four tallies  
fashion the basis for the house. Stick  
couch and TV neatly form,  
looking like a child’s rendering  
of a family’s living room.

Suddenly, two stick children jet  
by. Crude  
stick  
children  
demand dinner. I  
hear them demand dinner, their voices  
ringing  
like Catholic school church bells  
in my ears.

My stick house is double-floored  
like my parents’  
home.

When I wander to the kitchen  
a stick man wobbles as he prepares  
tally marks in a pot.  
You can hear the kids like thunder upstairs,  
a *clack clack clack* thunder.

They start screaming MOMMMY!  
I see no  
mother. The stick man  
turns to me:  
“Go on, dear.”

Their stick smiles protrude off stick faces.  
“Me?” When I look,

I see stick arms  
down at my sides, and stick legs. Stick feet! Stick stomach!  
Stick body.  
I'd always wanted to be skinny, but this?

I peer into the stick mirror  
and catch a stick figure peering  
back. I run to the window—  
stick trees! Stick kids  
still pegging  
around upstairs.

Outside, the stick tire swing sways  
as the stick kids  
play after their dinner.

I wake up, the notebook  
with the tally marks  
on my face,  
the page stuck  
to my skin,  
my drool on my chin.  
My boy  
friend snores loudly, his arm  
across my chest keeping me  
from rising.

## New Bruises

*Purpling bruises map the landscape  
On my back, on my collarbones,  
On my wrists. If one were to  
Connect the map they'd  
Know my favorite places.*

graduation crawfish boil, a bruise garnished  
my left collarbone  
I groaned each time I moved  
wrist bruises—*I tripped down the stairs*—  
for the millionth time?

the reason I don't want you, Mom,  
helping me pack my stuff  
when I move;  
the box under my bed I can't  
let you see—the cause of new bruises

bruises  
bruises pepper across my skin: my back,  
neck, wrists,  
teeth marks dotting down my collarbone,  
spread between my breasts,  
constellating between my hips and thighs  
—new bruises have materialized,

Christmas, 2017.  
Then when *Mad Max* came out.  
A random summer trip to Florida.

My *new bruises* are consensual.

## Ode on My Dandruff

I hope to be like dandruff when I die.  
Waging war, beautiful,  
as in *bella* from the Latin.  
War  
drobe choices. I fight, dandruff sneaking into caverns, camping  
in knots  
and wooded areas; tea-tree  
oils prove fruitless; the Stormtroopers that never surrender.  
It's almost beautiful. When there's so  
much of it on my pillow I can draw  
pictures with my pinky finger on the pillow case.

A snowfall  
collection on shoulders causing  
a shaking shirt syndrome  
I've grown comfortable with. Like when you spill  
a box of empty Snowcaps whose white dots  
scatter. You know you can't pick all of them  
up no matter how many you scoop;  
the white stuff will haunt you  
forever.

Like Dad's favorite candy. Long  
after he dies  
those snowcaps he spilled  
on the carpet  
while we watched *Star Wars Episode VI*  
I'll still be monkey-picking  
from the fibers. And Mom?

She used to comb with her fingers  
through my hair to pick  
my dry scalp and loose bits  
of dandruff. Like a momma monkey  
picking bugs. Loose pieces of skin flaked  
from my scalp whenever I ran  
my own fingers through my hair.  
No matter how much she combed,  
dandruff still spread like a spore.

Like the stars that freckle my favorite Star Wars shirt  
collecting behind Darth Vader: camouflage  
for my condition. Oh, they say hair  
is just dead scalp skin,

cells that grow into strands; dandruff  
is dead skin. Hair stays contained;  
dandruff runs amok, saturating  
everything it nears. I hope when I die  
to persist like dandruff.

## **Losing My Hair Pt. 2**

lost in diameter,  
my hair

I'll do it, I say,  
I'll really do it, flush it

down the drain, there,  
and offer, threaten even,

to shave my crown  
dandruff snow-scalp exposed

my bald will not be smooth like  
your squeaky windshield head

*plop* like the check  
your cancer delivers to the plumber

pepper hair dots  
everywhere you walk

I'll do it, I say  
I'll really do it

your capped head shakes  
your lips quake

a firm *no*.  
*You still got a lot of it left.*

### III



## Trinitas

*In nomine Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti...*

I.

In Kindergarten, my teacher in her dove  
voice said

The Holy Trinity, the three persons in one God  
is like  
the sun!  
The sun is a star, right? But it also  
has heat! It also sheds light over all  
the world  
like Jesus!

Teacher, you were spouting Arianism.

*Arianism:* A christological concept which asserts that  
Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit  
are creations of God the Father,  
therefore not equal to God the Father and so  
not one in nature with Him.

So, in my teacher's analogy,  
heat and light do not  
comprise the star itself.  
The star created them.

Arius, the founder,  
realized many Christians  
did not have a clear  
understanding of the Trinity.  
His explanation?  
Branded heresy.

II.

In 5<sup>th</sup> grade, my Religion  
Teacher shouted at us; how the hell  
Can three persons be in one God?

The Holy Trinity is like water.  
You can have water in the three states!  
Ice as God! Liquid Jesus! And vapor the Holy Spirit!

Actually, she proclaimed Sabellianism.

*Sabellianism*: the belief that the three persons  
occupy three different modes  
of one God as perceived by  
each person.

Opposing the idea of three  
distinct beings within one God,  
Sabellius, a third century priest,  
recognized that the Old Testament never  
referred to three different persons.  
His explanation of the man-  
made doctrine? Condemned as heresy.

III.

In high school, my Theology teacher began,

Okay, guys, I know it doesn't make sense,  
but think of it like this:  
a three-leaf clover!

She held one up,

A three-leaf clover! That's it!  
The Trinity.

No explanation. Which makes it Partialism.

*Partialism*: the belief that the three persons of  
the one godhead only together can fully complete God-  
ness and that separately each is

Only  $\frac{1}{3}$  God.

I know we attribute this analogy to St. Patrick,  
but did he know he initiated  
in Catholic schools  
years of heretical teachings?

Never having heard the correct metaphor  
nor been taught, are we merely repeating  
what we've heard? Are we never willing  
to learn real doctrine? To take the time  
to know our faith? Do all we know  
to do is spread  
heresies  
like Partialism? Like Sabellianism? Like Arianism  
all the time?

*Amen.*

## Exodus 14: 10-15

I have not seen  
The Plague, but I collect berries  
and vegetables from the garden  
I have cultured  
to cook for my family before  
I mend and fix their clothing.  
I usually start my day at a brisk 3AM  
and do not finish until after dusk.  
I eat only after my husband and children do.

I feel pains in my joints  
from the strenuous labor, and by now  
I may be pregnant  
with our fourth child  
at the age of 20. The chickens  
I have spent many months caring for, both for  
eggs and meat, have just been eaten  
by a predator  
I did not get a good look  
at. My husband is not pleased, and I fear  
his hands.

\*\*\*

When I attend the mass  
at my feudal lord's property, I hear it in the language  
I have grown accustomed  
to even if I don't understand.  
The harsh tongued language of the elite.  
The passage he reads today is from Exodus.  
He says,

*cumque adpropinquasset Pharao levantes filii Israhel oculos viderunt...<sup>1</sup>*

In other words, as the priest explains,  
“All you have to do is believe

---

<sup>1</sup> Full Latin passage: *cumque adpropinquasset Pharao levantes filii Israhel oculos viderunt Aegyptios post se et timuerunt valde clamaveruntque ad Dominum et dixerunt ad Mosen forsitan non erant sepulchra in Aegypto ideo tulisti nos ut moreremur in solitudine quid hoc facere voluisti ut educeres nos ex Aegypto nonne iste est sermo quem loquebamur ad te in Aegypto dicentes recede a nobis ut serviamus Aegyptiis multo enim melius est servire eis quam mori in solitudine et ait Moses ad populum nolite timere state et videte magnalia Domini quae facturus est hodie Aegyptios enim quos nunc videtis nequaquam ultra videbitis usque in sempiternum Dominus pugnabit pro vobis et vos tacebitis dixitque Dominus ad Mosen quid clamas ad me loquere filiis Israhel ut proficiscantur.*

*in the Lord, and he shall set  
you free. Believe, and you shall be free.”*

I wonder why I am not “free<sup>2</sup>” yet.

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<sup>2</sup> English text: As Pharaoh approached, the Israelites looked up, and there were the Egyptians, marching after them. They were terrified and cried out to the Lord. They said to Moses, “Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us to the desert to die? What have you done to us by bringing us out of Egypt? Didn’t we say to you in Egypt, ‘Leave us alone; let us serve the Egyptians’? It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert!” Moses answered the people, “Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the Lord will bring you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never see again. The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still.” Then the Lord said to Moses, “Why are you crying out to me? Tell the Israelites to move on.

## Apologia Pro Maria Magdalena

Pope Gregory the Great's 33<sup>rd</sup> homily in the year 591 A.D. declared Mary of Magdala the same as Luke's sinner, the one *stans retro secus pedes eius lacrimis coepit rigare pedes eius*, the prostitute. We conflated her with all sinful women in the New Testament. We write this letter to express our utmost, deepest, most genuine, most sincere and heartfelt condolences on *others*, not us, having attributed such an atrocity to a woman who exemplified Christian living to women, daughters, wives, and sisters. We may have misspoke which caused *others* to mistake the women. We always knew who she was not. The original intention of aforementioned incorrect association of the woman in question was done in order to create a more understandable analysis of the Bible to those unable to read and had to rely on us as their only source of the Catholic teachings since at the time our dominant language for the educated was Latin. We have come to realize that could have been a mistake.

After all, it is not our fault *others* were not able to grasp the concept in the following years. In 1969, our brethren recognized a change in the Easter reading and homily. Before, Magdalene was referred to as a sinner and prostitute, *meretrix, scortum*, but now she was reiterated as no such woman. The prostitute status then revoked, it should not fall on *us* to rectify the public's opinion. This has been such a grave mistake in matters of sensitivity to not only one woman, but all women when it comes to the female essence. In honor of the consecrated woman who first witnessed Jesus' resurrection before any of his male apostles, something we question often, we will celebrate a feast day on June the 22<sup>nd</sup> that people silly *surely* remember. She is the women who should help women see themselves as the aid we, men, need to experience a spousal relationship with God. Women's dignity has often been unacknowledged and their prerogatives misrepresented; they have often been relegated to the margins of society and even reduced to sexually deviant.

Our Bible, having never mentioned Magdala as a prostitute, tells us that she was *mulieres aliquae quae erant curatae ab spiritibus malignis et infirmitatibus Maria quae vocatur Magdalene de qua daemonia septem exierant*; her brother was raised from his eternal rest by our Savior as well. We have now done all that we can to ensure that Mary of Magdala is no longer a sinful woman in the public eye and interpretation so we can only hope this letter's circulation will prohibit priests whose homilies subject her as such. It is out of *our* hands now. The public must learn. However, we are sorry, Maria Magdalena. Being in the public eye, as well as being a people devoted to public service, is about being honest even when you make a mistake, and we, the Vatican, have done so. We are proud to admit our wrongdoings and will continue to address them as they arise.

Sincerely, Gloriously, Repentant As We've Always Been,  
The Vatican

## **Fall, Jump, Accident**

*Project MKUltra: a top-secret CIA program for covert use of “biological and chemical materials.” Frank Olson “died” at the Manhattan Hotel, November 28, 1953. MKUltra is thought to be involved.*

Ruled a fall.

Ruled a jump.

Ruled an accident.

A fall, a jump, an accident.

A jump, a fall, an accident.

An accident, a jump, a fall.

Rumored jump.

Ruled a fall:

accident.

It was an accident.

It was a jump,

A fall. To fall. To jump.

To accident.

To fall into a jump,

Fall, jump, accident: push.

## Hypocrites

I.

*Hu-bump*

*Hu-bump*

*Hu-bump*

With every turn of the tire, I felt the *hu-bump*.  
KILLER RUBBER SQUASHES BIRD!  
The headline resounded like a choir, a reverse  
echo that got louder with every *hu-*  
*bump* of the bird murder.

Think, Poe's "Tell Tale Heart."  
only,

*Hu-bump*

*Hu-bump*

*Hu-bump*

So I ran over a bird. Call it involuntary bird-slaughter. Accidental.  
Pile of concrete colored feathers *thunked* the hood  
of the neighboring car at a red-light, his neck careening to—  
PLINK went the green-light and  
bird slid off, perfectly timed with my tire.

Three *hu-bumps*  
and I knew he was dead.

October 20, 2015, the day I murdered the bird.  
Also the day Ohio delayed executions  
for seven  
death row inmates: 2017 would be  
their death year.  
My previous theory that Ohio  
held only four people within its borders  
was proven wrong.



## II.

Meet Robert Van Hook.

Setting: Gay bar, Cincinnati,  
1985. Robert “Bobby” Van hooked  
unsuspecting David Self. Strangled  
David Self. Stabbed David Self.  
Murdered David Self. Homophobic  
panic, otherwise known as fear of self.

Bobby was injected on July 18, 2018.  
He had married a week before  
to his Australian pen pal. He waited  
33 years to die.

Meet Sr. Helen Prejean, the one  
who told me how; I know  
what will happen to Bobby. The three drug  
givers will sit in separate rooms out  
of view of the audience, of Bobby,  
of the doctor, only here to declare  
a dead Bobby. A doctor, there to make  
sure death is safe. There will be a button  
for each injector. There will be a light  
above each button. When it comes on, Injector  
will push the button. The three do not know which  
of them will deliver the final dose.

Button One. Sodium thiopental. Anesthetic. This unwinding will be unknown to Bobby, unless they do it wrong. If they do it wrong, his stomach will swell in unknown hernia, and his gasping for air will penetrate the glass in between him and his spectators.

Button Two. Pancurium bromide. Liquid will ink into veins, muscle relaxer—if done right. So they say.

Button three. Potassium chloride will stop the heart. Some will say this heart stopped long ago, in 1985.

III.

Reader, do *you* know how the death  
penalty is performed? Performed,  
they say, as if it's a show or talent that we can  
watch. That at the end of we can clap  
and say, "Bravo! Again, again!"

Three rooms, separate. Four  
if you count Bobby's, imprisoned  
on a gurney, a word I hate for how it  
comes out the mouth, like regurgitating  
a word we can't remember from long ago. Gurneys,  
wheeled beds that roll patients to their saviors or bodies  
to their graves, now also used for those in between, those  
rolled to their final living destination; straps  
will coil around his wrists and legs.

Patches and heart monitors will pepper  
Bobby's chest. His lungs will expand—*in-out-*  
*in-out-in-out*—rapidly, as if they know  
that soon their job will end. Two needles  
will prick and enter his epidermis.  
They will slide into place with trouble at first. *Poking,*  
*poking, poking* until the right vein pops.

Enter Isotonic solution. Harmless. So they say.

There will be a curtain call  
because an audience will have gathered  
to watch the "performance." Spectators: loved  
ones of both Bobby and David. Curtain between Bobby  
and his spectators, and curtains separating  
the other three rooms. A second injection will slither  
in, will render Bobby sleepy.

All I'm saying is  
I knew I did it.

## **M.A.C. Lip Colors**

We take a **sushi kiss**  
from a dead fish  
and apply it to our mouth meat;  
peeling flesh  
the color of raw salmon  
to coat lips with shade.

We call it Saigon because we miss  
Saigon. We call it 'the fall  
of Saigon' because Ho Chi  
Minh Summer doesn't have the ring  
**Saigon Summer**  
has, not naming it a red  
lipstick because red signifies blood,  
and we've forgotten war.  
Now, we visit Saigon on vacation.

## Ash

When you held the sun's threshold,  
dragging rays behind you, waking humanity,  
you heard him. There is nothing like the cry  
of the Phoenix. In that moment, you dropped  
your reins. The blood-red beauty did not stop  
for you. In his song, you heard the trembling  
that carried lamentations of time  
in vain. "Let me die!" came his cry.  
He was old. He was dying. Young  
and seething in your own jealousy,  
you stomped him into dust. You then held  
morning still.  
When the bird emerged from dust,  
you crushed him again.  
And again.  
Until finally, he asked to switch places.  
You, a god, had never experienced  
death, so you complied.  
Death took its hold of you,  
the world blanketed in darkness.

## Making Roses

Every spring Sister Flaviana made roses  
with fingertips so rosy and soft  
from aged skin. Her voice never rose  
above a whisper. She'd

*My sweets, take a ribbon  
in the color you want. Any color  
your precious hearts desire. Purple,  
gold, pink, red.*

She gave directions to anyone  
willing to listen,

*Fold one end of the L the other way in the opposite  
direction—yes, like so, dove. Very good!  
Ignore the piece you just folded and take the other  
piece of ribbon—like so, yes—and bring that one  
to the other side now. Goodness gracious,  
you are doing so well! Repeat these steps until you have a tall stack of ribbon.*

Then she'd take  
our ribbon dangling below the rose  
and wrapped it around a fake  
flower stem. She would use green  
tape to make the stem natural.

Even after cancer had tugged  
Sister away from us abruptly  
in the middle of the school year,  
after my second grade teacher  
was suddenly missing in the classroom,  
after a real adult I had known and loved  
was suddenly plucked from me,  
the tradition continued;  
students and colleagues  
kept it. I can still hear her,

*Take this tiny square  
in your little fingers and press  
on the flat part of one section of the ribbon. Then push  
them all up—push the entire stack upward. There you go!  
It will become a rose as you push the ribbon down. Beautiful,  
isn't it? Flowers are a gift  
from God much like artistic talent and craftsmanship.*

They asked me  
to speak at her funeral. At eight, I couldn't  
have done the elegy justice. I stuttered  
through my sobs, choking,  
reading my words through slippery  
glasses, distraught that death  
takes only prisoners  
even among people like her.

*We are blessed, my children.*

People would leave varied  
colored flowers in places  
all over campus. When someone  
found one, it was like getting  
a gift from her. It was like Sister  
whispering, "Congratulations!  
You made it through the winter!"

## VITA

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