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Miss Those Men

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MISS THOSE MEN

By

Sarah J. Wangler

THESIS

Submitted to
Northern Michigan University
In partial fulfillment of the requirements
For the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Graduate Studies Office

2009

SIGNATURE APPROVAL FORM

This thesis by Sarah J. Wangler is recommended for approval by the student's thesis committee in the Department of English and by the Dean of Graduate Studies.

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ABSTRACT

MISS THOSE MEN

By

Sarah J. Wangler

This Master's thesis is a collection of poems rife with imagery from the natural world which are thematically centered on many different aspects of yearning from a distinctly feminine perspective. The poems recount narratives of missing women, of women who miss, and of women who would have been better off had they missed out on certain relationships. In addition to thematic considerations, it pays homage to poetic convention through its inclusion of the following poetic forms: sonnet, pantoum, sestina, and villanelle.

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2009

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This thesis follows the format prescribed by the MLA Style Guide and the Northern Michigan University Department of English.

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INTRODUCTION

Storytelling and music are at the heart of poetry's past. Any English student can tell you that the earliest literature was poetic. Bards who spent their lives composing ballads and epics contributed to society by entertaining others and by setting events to verse to preserve memories. Modern culture, however, has moved away from poetry as a preferred medium for historical preservation and amusement. The printing press and the computer have made poetry's original practical uses all but disappear. Nevertheless, the art form lives on; poetry is still studied, criticized, and written. It offers something we are unwilling to let go. Perhaps this is because we learn in rhymes as children, and we continue to delight in the music of language as adults. Heather McHugh describes this phenomenon in her introduction to *Best American Poetry 2007*:

Poetry attracted me in the first place, fifty years ago, because . . . it seemed constitutively thunderstruck, wonderstruck. The oddity and opportunity of verbal life seemed not just a poem's object, but its fundamental subject: In a poem, theme and instrument could not be torn apart. (xvii)

Poets are, as McHugh goes on to say, "fond of the textures of a text." The rhythms and sounds words make when strung together are pleasing to me. One of my poems illustrates a desire to feel words in my mouth and to be delighted by them. It is called "Pistachio, Pistachio." The word "pistachio," rich in rhythmic value, deviates from the iambic sound pattern most people's speech and poetry assume. The four-syllable word begins with an iamb, or unstressed/stressed pattern: *pi-sta*, but finishes with a trochee or stressed/unstressed syllable: *chi-oh*.

In the poem, my love of alliteration and assonance is particularly noticeable. The following lines, for example, “of that old gray cold grease full floor, grate/ hid a crick of dead oil, brown black bows /of rain swirls” display assonance with several recurrences of the “oh” sound, as I’ve underlined. Likewise, *hid*, *crick* and *swirl* use the short “i” to counteract the open-mouthed “oh.” *Gray*, *grease*, and *grate* coupled with *brown*, *black*, and *bows*, along with *cold* and *crick*, are all examples of alliteration. The poem ends with additional assonance using short “i.” It also uses “s,” “l,” and “m” alliteratively. Finally, consonance is interspersed throughout: “feel the salt spit on your lips, lick, miss those men.”

“The Vale of Rest,” an ekphrastic poem, or poem inspired by a painting, uses rhythm and rhyme to strengthen its imagery and give it impact. The poem is named after the painting by Sir John Everett Millais. The stanza that follows uses line length, rhyme, and scansion to attract the reader’s attention.

The Sister can’t remember defiance, lust
Or even zest for life. There is only Christ,
Vespers, whispers in the corridor, prayer,
And caring for the poor.

The shift in narrative is emphasized by the last line of the foregoing stanza, shorter than the other four. Another exceptionally long line in the poem reads: “Add depth to hole she’s in, shovels fill somber-faced.” I want the readers to linger on the image as their eyes move down to the next stanza, which begins with a very short line: “The Other She.” The brevity is shocking; it asks the reader to switch gears quickly. Line length often drives (or at least reflects) narrative in my poetry.

The obvious rhymes are *sister, vesper, whisper, prayer, care* (caring); and *corridor, poor*. Rhyme is embedded in the lines to make the poem ring musically, but does not assault the reader with hard end-stopped rhymes. The poem is mostly iambic, but the third line deviates from the pattern: *vespers* and *whispers* are both trochees. This departure from the lulling iambs both gives the reader a break from a monotonous string of iambs and complements *sister* in the first line, which is also trochaic.

I aim to craft poems that are more pleasant to hear than they are to contemplate but strive to treat difficult subject matter seriously as well. I encountered the work of Dylan Thomas in Austin Hummell's poetry workshop in the FA07 semester, and Thomas has since become a major influence on my writing. Dylan Thomas's "Poetic Manifesto" says, "The first poems I knew were nursery rhymes, and before I could read them for myself I had come to love just the words of them, the words alone. What the words stood for, symbolized, or meant was of very secondary importance—what mattered was the very sound of them as I heard them for the first time" (34). I would like to write poems as musically pleasing for the sake of sound as those of Dylan Thomas. Thomas was more sensitive to the musicality of language than to meaning:

You can tear a poem apart to see what makes it technically tick, and say to yourself, when the words are laid out before you, the vowels, the consonants, the rhymes or rhythms, 'Yes this is it. This is why the poem moves me so. It is because of the craftsmanship.' But you're back again where you began. You're back with the mystery of having been moved by words. (36)

By striving for musical sounds over literal meaning, I seek to move people with my words. Thus, my attention to metrics is an attempt at retaining cultural relevance.

Work may seem less accessible if people are unable to garner instant meaning from the words, but as long as the music behind the words communicates an arc of emotions, I feel that my poetry is doing its job.

A poet I read consistently throughout my study of poems and literature is Pablo Neruda. One thing I am drawn to in Neruda is his passion for writing: “I believe that poetry is a solemn and transient act” (385). I share his view that poetry transcends the poet and encompasses all of humanity. The act of writing a poem, as Neruda says in his 1971 Nobel Prize acceptance speech, is one in “which solitude and unity, emotion and action, one’s private world and the secret revelations of nature contribute in equal measure” (385). My poems are based on both personal and communal experiences. I work with real-life and imagined characters. Poems that display a balanced meaning to the poet and to others are the poems that last because they tap into the collective unconscious.

Another poet whose work I have long admired and with whom I have studied is Mary Ann Samyn. She has had the most influence on my graduate work. Her obsession with feminine/domestic subject matter and experimentation with white space and logophiliacal playfulness have shaped the way I look at my own poetry and at the poetry of others. In Samyn’s third full-length collection, the first poem is “Purr”:

1. contentment or
2. . . . of an engine
3. *more, please* (Samyn 4)

The poem is playful, offering the reader little more than the title to discern any meaning from the seven words. However, she works with assonance, and in the final line, readers instinctively feel as though they, too, are purring at the thought of some delight.

Samyn's first full-length collection of poems, entitled *Captivity Narratives*, focuses strongly on women who were captives. The enslavement or abduction of these women is the inspiration for the subject matter in my thesis. Samyn couples poems about Mary Rowlandson with poems about Alice in Wonderland and explores their removal, return, and enchantment. My poems explore captivity, relationships, and other aspects of the stories of Alice, the Greek goddess Persephone, and their mothers. My thesis includes modern stories of missing women, of women who miss, and of women who would have been better off had they missed out on certain relationships. In addition to thematic considerations, I have paid homage to poetic convention by including in this collection several sonnets, a pantoum, a sestina, and a villanelle.

To come to nothing, I went astray.

i.

When he left, he tore me (like tendons
when I've run too hard, too long
without stretching.) Before

(or after), the rift, my feet pound
a path through pithy voices.
I escape (he too, broke free).

In my head, no one talked guilt, whispered:
I wanted it to happen.

ii.

Beat a drum. Trickle rice-pebbles
in a rain-stick rich chant. Squawk
for a sea-baby. A thunder-baby.

Even a plain-baby. Pray
to those mythy gods I have left.
I had a mishap. Carrying him

fell through: a leak sprung in the levy.
Though, slowly.

Falls

Sweat in pools, the small of your back soaks East,
stains your National Chemistry Week shirt.
Blood, a banged up knee. You can't keep up. The
drill sergeant in your head pushes you hard.
Bile pushes back. You hike fifteen miles up
a Teton mountain trail, Cascade Canyon,
filled with rivulets, there's ice on the rocks.
Yawn sneaks in, you're not used to this thin air.
Take off the shirt, wash it in a stream, wear
it wet. Look left. Waterfall, patch of snow,
first spring berries. Through bee-sting tears, wheeze.
The hike will be there after your tears dry.
Don't quote Shiva, you're not a destroyer,
just a girl in Reeboks who hates to fall.

Missionary Sonnet #2

Like blood and bits of teeth, you are every
mistake. I've eaten every phantom pain of an ex-
lover's touch, sweet rocky mountain oyster,
you make me sad whenever I see you.
Those hairs in your ear are salty and soft
but I am not a lifesaver or raft
floating through your fancy. I am snowstorms
and ice in Alaska. I am whispers
and stolen-sock moments. I'll fling soap at
your face as if I could ferret away
the glint of your eye-tooth behind a couch
in my brain. Don't tickle me for fighting,
and please don't park your station wagon here.

Get your spiritual gifts in order.

When I was eleven, Mother enrolled me in the future missionaries club at church. We met on Sunday afternoons. We rolled bandages, we packed children's books, like primers: tales of Jesus to send to people far away. Papua New Guinea, Panama, Chile, Brazil, Peru. We learned to eat pizza and look to god in prayer. I clung to hope that my husband would be a bush pilot, would die, bravely, of course. I knew my position, and I couldn't wait to marry a man out of seminary. I'd be a teacher-nurse and seek adventures where god couldn't look.

Mother Love

Because the wave of her spiral perm catches dusty sunlight,
I like my mother on her wedding day. In a national park

bathroom, I cinch her slim torso into an ivory bodice laced
with flowers. I knot the necklace so we can see

the dangling glint of her moonstone cross. She rests
at my kitchen table sipping tea. Her skirts cross

in hushed disapproval when I brew by the cup.
She is calmed by the offering she comes to give:

the ring of a failed venture. Saved from a saltwater goodbye,
she wants it to be mine. Like the necklace,

I am torn from her in frustration. My fingers, links,
the gold is her thin smile when we were engaged.

May Trees

When I woke to find you gone, potatoes filled my belly,
nestled in their sack.

Bile danced up my throat. Curtains I didn't sew
spilt blue and tan,

a gingham grid. Girdle of me vs. you: toenail clippings
and cords too close to the heat register.

I sprinkled tears like bird food around the forest,
all paths led home.

May trees swished in pre-storm light,
a dangling pear,

succulent, a ground squirrel clambered, a protein
gardener defending his stash.

I perched behind the window screen: nymphs played
in the leaves.

Cows Eat Their Afterbirth.

Lotus flowers grow in filth, but
die in the moonlight on a rusty floor:
to be fertile is filthy.

Your mother banned you from
high-school biology; she wore skirts
because her heart was right

with god. You think you love her
when you stop to eat the roses.
But Alice in Wonderland is the myth
you believe in.

You can shoot a moose, carry
that bull back to camp, field dress a mouse,
and hunt weasels in your chicken coop.

Can you can cherries in early June
or condemn the morning after?
Each month you'll die.

You, too, are a little lonely flower,
floating on the scummy pond.

Our Tender Bellies are Wound in Baling Wire

Demeter carries a paintbrush round during indian summers. Tan-belly bare, polka-dotted breasts, makes trees brown.

A wintry gloss covers early mornings. Melts to a matte finish most days by noon. Pears drop like dead leaves and children

gather both. Fruits go home for jams. Juiced cheeks, jumping into piles feet-first, they frolic til bits of dirt stick to their fingers.

Later, tomatoes and pumpkins shrivel in patches. Springtime kids will poke and pop and fling the mealy corpses.

She sweeps chilled fog cross the hilly lake, pocked with islands. Eye-sores for the naiads.

Look at the reflection of trees, of red and yellow dying leaves. Here, in god's country.

Pistachio, Pistachio

Lay on the side of a wet road – let rain,
snow lick your face, lap
up your curses. Stick grit to your coat.

Like the creep of burnt
nuts, spit white salt, your lips
and tongue sore, green skins.
Crack crop in two's – part dry roast
shells like teeth crack. Think
of that old gray cold grease floor. Grate
that hid a crick of dead oil where brown swirled.
Think how the smell still means men,
still means come with dad, fix things, drink beer.

Look up at this car,
this broke piece of god damn shit: rust
on the doors, hub caps fell off who-knows-when.
Feel the dry salt on your lips, lick, miss those men.

My Vagina is Not a Garage

9:

Someone on Bus Slot 7 whispers that s-e-x
is when the daddy parks his car in the mommy's garage.

11:

I hide things from Mom,
read romance novels, and learn the real uses
for the VJ. I name mine
Jill (which is also the term for female ferret),
and which is better than garage.

15:

I accidentally have my first orgasm
in a barn, suck face
on a torn-out Cutlass Supreme seat.
I am wearing snow pants, a Carhart.

16:

I'm forced into
by the same boy from the barn.
Hide it from Mom, pray
for no pregnancy.
Go to confession, Hail Mary
Mother of even
garages named Jill.

Palindromes

Nobody's got a quarter on pain like
the woman whose body housed that tortured
mind. Nobody's here, walking me through steps
like Emily, locked away in her room.
My hair smells like hay bales, a hick.
I'm not so far from my wood-tick raising.

Too bad I quit working in fields. Raising
corn, sorghum, horses, and cows. Cycles like
green arenas. Now, metal gates form tick
havens and calf pens. Rust in the torture,
in the muck and the wind. My childhood room
pale yellow against the number of steps

I had to climb. The phone number, the steps
wanted to mirror. Repeat with reason.
The word that scared me was "go-to-your-room."
I became three four five - five four three, like
it pretended to reflect, I tortured.
Switched, added a five here or there. Some hickey

to hide, lines of sixes marking time. Hick
sucked my neck, wanted to push me down steps.
Proposed, lulled my daddy into tortured
security. Wrinkles, blankets, raisins.
Coddled broken mirror luck: pretence like
threes, liting lines of sixes, making room.

Then, drink a number here or there. Rum –
like children, make songs about a wood-tick
who swills fear from a future they can't like.
Run, the barn falls down around their heads. Steps
sag like the foundation crumbled, raising
neighbors' concerns. Dad's eyes were torture.

Still, the barn's around our heads. Torturing
my daughter's panoramic view – her room,
my room, a foundation crumbled. Raising
her, I am small. Her dad will be the hickie
police. Her dates will toe a line, straight steps.
When I was small, alone one spring, I liked

the promises. Like flowers can torture,
angels line the steps to her bedroom. Her
hick daddy don't call, but baby's lip's a-raisin.

A lone skier treks through the yard into sunrise.

Snowed in Uptown the day she was born. Ron told Diane
it was the first day of the world, Saturday, A.M. 1985. Told her, "I'm sorry."
And "I love you," and tenderly, "Can I hold you[r] baby?"
Whispered nothing, left. Wondered, "Is she mine?"
Snow toed lover girl, grasp the hope from that three line email like a tampon
string. Tug loose that tub-stopper, sprinkle scent
on the sheets. Later, churn those words over
and over under cherry scented bubbles. Shiver, flick your hair
over the shoulder of his sweater: wear what she
kept, what she wore holes through,
sniffed imagined smiles and face-grazing fingers inside navy cable-knit arms.
Channel the chance of snow, the rough hands, the leaving.
Listen to the cries her smile masked, finger the letters in an old note:
"It's over."

She's Got Great Pumpkins, Charlie Brown.

You'll be fondling wolves, witches, kittens
carved by the jack-o-lantern goddesses
of sexy, skanky and slutty
as they dare – girls next-door turn
tricks like whores. Wonderland Alice across
the room, you in fuzzy blue
toga – your finest kegger wear.
A calf-length pinafore carries an unspoilt
pumpkin, wears mary janes, hides seeds,
bony elbows, and brown eyes.

Linus, when you're older, who will you dream
of fucking in your pumpkin fields at night?
Lucy with her psychology and five-cent
diagnoses, or Sally, the cuter Charlie in pink
who wonders in and out of fields. Waiting,
waiting, promise rings, pearl-and-diamond walkways
of high school proms, tears broken on biting winds.
Sally sees white rabbits while you mumble
dreams of pumpkins and you both know that hope lies.

Mother Talk

Dear Demeter:

I'm the Demeter for my own Persephone.
What should be done about the girls?
Sacrifice is out of style, please respond post-haste.

Yrs,
Mrs. Alice-in-Wonderland

Dear Mrs. Alice:

I mope four months a year.
Your baby is still there, blue dress, white pinafore
bouncing around in bonnets and lace.
You know nothing of my centuries.

-Demeter

Dearest Demeter:

Wait! Alice descends to sleep with (and in) the underworld
through a rabbit hole. Two summers in a row. I've spoken
with Mr. Carroll, but I, too, mourn with chill, this loss.

Warmly,
Mrs. A

Mrs. Alice:

I see. I do more about our sadness than you. Bloody
Mary's can't make me smile. The girls seem to enjoy
each other's company...

-Demeter, Goddess of grain and fertility, the pure.

Love Nest

Three months of the year, I want to die.
I crawl into psychic death and nest
with men who risk Demeter's wrath.

Stairs to the underworld turn to rabbit holes.
I forget the world, trip-tumble down, ashes
crumble and blow in the wind. I shuffle
between leaves and vines. Earth fingers leave
graffiti on my cheeks, in my hair.

I seem salient. I am sentient. Sentimental. I drink
tea to remind me it's everyone's un-birthday,
most of the time. I am Alice and I am Persephone.
I flower in fertile wombs. I am mad.

Persephone's Valentine

You walk down the stairs to be
pimped on the streets of Hades' kingdom.
Sweaty men pump into you, grown
men, but never come.

Even after life, there's desire to conquer.
Death is masculine, Persephone.
You, like Alice, stumbled into darkness,
made the mistake of eating seeds.

Even suicide can't save you.
Do you turn your head? Grimace? Smear
lipstick on your face, chop your own hair?

Even sunshine has to be unbearable. Warmth soaks
where those fingers grip.
They pump their despair into you.

Deer Camp

Opening morning, Grandpa slinks off to his blind.
Four AM, he crackles two sticks, swears out loud,
His thirty aught six slung over his left shoulder,
A red-plaid flap-cap on his head.

Four AM, he crackles two sticks, swears out loud.
Last year, I followed, snuck behind him quietly,
A red-plaid chook on his head;
I had to know where his blind was.

Last year, I followed, snuck behind him quietly:
He had secrets; he'd get the first deer,
I had to know where his blind was.
He always brought the biggest buck back.

He had secrets; he'd get the first deer,
Hands bloodstained, one bullet less in his belt,
He always brought the biggest buck back.
It had to be about location. He heard me behind him.

Hands bloodstained, one bullet less in his belt
He called out, "Sarah, did I forget something?"
It had to be about location. He heard me behind him.
He laughed, shook his head, and put his arm around me.

He called out, "Sarah, did I forget something?"
I silently gave in to my unspoken plea, "teach me!"
He laughed, shook his head, and put his arm around me.
We brought back a twelve point to camp together.

Last year, I silently gave in to my unspoken plea.
Opening night, I found him out by the popple tree.
We brought back a twelve point to camp together.
Staring, frozen, gun cocked and ready,

Opening night, I found him out by the popple tree,
resting on the supports, aimed forever, loaded.
He's staring, frozen, gun cocked and ready,
waiting for a rack to stumble into the clearing.

His thirty aught six slung over his left shoulder,
Opening morning Grandpa slinks off to his blind.

Other Native American Tales

In November leaves crinkle, snow falls,
sticks snap underfoot. Soon we'll be crawling
into deer blinds nicer than our apartments,
to bring home a trophy buck, to fill the fridge, to shoot something
still-spotted, the size of a Lab.

We visit Uncle Gerry in the woods.
Trek a mile down trails to different blinds.
Hope you don't get stuck hunting close to Turk –
he'll shoot anything that moves.
Bud Light, hunter-orange chooks and an 8-person
Deer Palace. Fifteen by fifteen and fully stocked
with kegs to be tapped when we're shit-faced drunk.
We tell stories after dark over poker.

I threw up when I gutted my first deer. My cousin
got shot in the butt, or maybe he shot himself in the foot
last year. He burst out of his blind, first-deer adrenaline
coursed through him like a bowling ball, he
hopped around, cursed, tied it off with his blue
and black flannel and tracked the doe he'd just shot
for another mile until he found her,
frantic, breathing sparkles of blood onto the frozen
snow, too weak to run any further. He sliced her throat.

Grandma's silent as a cat-in-heat. Bring home the eight,
ten, twenty-six point bucks, but bring home Jimmy with his eyebrows,
because last year he jumped through a fourteen-foot
bonfire and they were singed.

Aliens

As a girl, I slept in the attic at the family farm;
I had my own room. My grandmother taught me
to make a foil hat when my cousin told me aliens would abduct me
in my sleep if I didn't wear a long enough nightgown.
Afraid no one would hear my screams, my fears were soothed
because the foil hat would protect my brain from detection.
A point on top like a cartoon character's concoction – I laugh silently.

My grandmother calls me now, in the middle of nights,
afraid she's lost my grandfather. "He slipped
away in the night, he must be doing chores,
or at the casino." Always, I drive over.
I help her search for a man I never met: he died
before I was born, until she falls asleep in her chair.
I'll carry her frail white-haired body
back upstairs and tuck it under a hand-made quilt.
Some mornings, she thinks I'm her daughter, her sister,
her mother. I make Irish breakfast tea and soft boiled eggs.

Hearts attack bodies of those who are too brutal.
Age attacks the mind after years of shushing better instincts.
Some nights, my hands shake.
And I know that soon, there'll be no more phone calls.

At three A.M., three swirling lights follow alongside
my car through the sky for twenty-two and a half miles;
the skeptic inside decides it must be a UFO.
I imagine green men with E.T. fingers who steal my grandma's
memories of my childhood, or tall imposing figures in
silver foily gowns. I wish for my tin hat.
The skeptic inside decides it must be a UFO or angels.
In any case, underneath these wrinkly exteriors, our brains are kept safe.

They all carried ghosts

Afterward, she thinks, suicide.

(A stray stuck in the basement of a duplex,
dangerous as any unknown gully.)

Thinks, the mother didn't run.

(Cat chose to stay, ate her own
newborns, mewled to herself, shook
speckles of their blood from her whiskers.
Ruined the comforter under the bed.)

Thinks, no comfort for her.

(Only dried blood - browned crust -
kittens. She missed.)

I guess this is a sort of manifesto.

Midnight hides in my box spring
like a cat, uprooted. Moved to yowls,
fearing new places, smells.

Pisses on the mahogany table,
isn't seen for days at a time,
sleeps in piles of plastic grocery sacks.

In my box spring, midnight lurks
under cobwebs. Bed bugs
skitter across His naked skin

sticky in mid-Michigan's summer heat,
He swats spiders; Midnight takes cover.

Midnight curdles humid nights
like dried love stuck on plaid sheets.

Bobbing for Apples

Same day, two Great Lakes, two girls want to swim.
Heading north to Miner's Beach they pulled off the side
of the road: one indulging the other's whim.

They scramble over sand-dunes and onto a thin strip
of shore. They wade in the waves; wonder about tides.
One day to drive, two lakes to dip in, the girls just want to swim.

In the sand, curly hair stoops to write "D – loves Tim."
Straight-hair giggles. She draws stick figures on the side
of the road with her toe, indulgent of her sister's whims.

Straight-hair strips beside the car, slips into a sin
colored bikini. As she swims, cars honk, she glides
over waves. Dressing, her clothes cover windows, Wham!

She shuts the towel in the door to hang-dry. They came to swim.
Satisfied with a rustic campsite after a long hike, night
falls. Curly shakes droplets from the two lakes they've swum,

no, conquered, onto Straight's firelit face. On a log, legs numb
in cool spring air. Stories of bears, mace and lies
float across the fire. They share some Bud as their chapped lips spin

the fantastic details of the day: they can't remember who dove in
first, what they ate for lunch, or wrote in the sand. Curly cries.
tears span two Great Lakes, the two girls had to swim.
Hair-loss starts soon, so one indulges the other's whim.

The Vale of Rest

i.

A woman digs, committed
by her family's churchly vows
to her job, to seeing things through.

A grave, white headscarf shows devotion
to the savior, to the Christ-husband,
to walking slowly, speaking sweetly and living for
eternal things. Hair wisps around the edges
of her face. Streaks of July-evening dirt
add depth to hole she's in, shovels fill somber-faced.

ii.

The Other She
supervises the young nun's punishment
for dancing in the abbey yard:
labor turns graveyard ground into
dead brown dust.

The Sister can't remember defiance, lust
or even zest for life. There is only Christ,
vespers, whispers in corridors, prayer,
and caring for the poor.

iii.

Something's wrong with the painting.
Soles of feet rot underneath the young nun.
The woman posing in Sir John Everett Millais' kitchen
models as the young nun every day for six months.
Sober, committed: no painting takes place.
She pantomimes digging.

I'll give you ten seconds to get out of this house

Last pennies squandered on stamps, letters to males
dropped in blue boxes. Full of ashen faces, war
memories dance to reggae: a bizarre dream.

My grandmother holds her husband's hand, blood mingling
with tears as I simultaneously touch the sixty-year old
scar. Tenderly probing - meaning well like the social worker

Grandma tells me convinced her to take Roy back. Divorce
would be bad for the children, her sons would be gay,
daughters would go to college, become career women. And so,

fearing the worst, shoulders squared, she gritted her teeth
and let them stitch the buckshot wound without anesthesia.
She knew they couldn't afford it, that he would do it again

despite what the motherly social worker said, that my aunt
would get married in a courthouse on a Wednesday morning in
street clothes to ensure that he couldn't ruin her wedding day.

He'd stumble home, paycheck spent at the tracks, wake up
hung-over, point that gun at her head, threaten her for stealing
his money to buy shoes for the boys, pull the trigger. Knows,

there are holes in the wall. Gray at thirty two, grim-faced,
arm in arm, she'll lead him out of jail with eyes a little sorry,
kiss his cheek for the news, nod demurely as their story

becomes another "success" among domestic disputes - a war
hero reborn as a family man, a recovering alcoholic, a changed man.
Recovering she saw, but not from alcoholism, no, of alcoholism.

She'll take apart the gun, throw out some small piece, put it back together
and still flinch when the flint-lock doesn't go off, when he curses, hand back
her lips bleed. She'll pray for early menopause, no more children, widowhood.

She hopes I never feel the pain she has felt, not only in the jagged scar
along her right cheek, but in the tear that slipped down her wrinkled face,
down my mother's, down my own.

Another failed poem about Chewy

Cold tongues my ears in the morning. Rejection
means nothing because food still falls from the stove

while I cook breakfast and popcorn. He sleeps in my bed,
enjoys his alpha-male comfort, nuzzles against my chest.

Door bells mean six pounds of fury shudder at my feet.
Black, gold flecked fur growls fiercely, nips

about the new boyfriend's too-friendly embrace.
Chewy pools his hot anger like an oil leak, puddling

in the middle of the kitchen floor, slippery outside the bathroom
door. Later, he'll sulk when I say *I'm sorry*,

balk at my cuddling. Turn his face from mine when I beg
for a kiss, for token affection, settle for a forced hug.

For three years after he left, I cried
at his name. I tattooed his age on my toes

and wondered if he'd wondered why he wasn't enough,
why I hated when he looked at me naked in the mirror,

whether I returned his tough-guy version of love - I did.
Now, I remember his paws scratching my skin in the bathtub,

think, maybe that's the way to be:
openly hostile to anyone we don't belong to.

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