Bound in Twine

A collection of poetry

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ABSTRACT

The following thesis contains a collection of original poetry, either written or revised during my tenure as a graduate student. This thesis also contains a critical introduction of the collection’s forms, underlying writing processes, experimental techniques, and themes.

The first priority of the introduction is to autobiographically trace the state of my poetry from its first poems to this collection of stories and poems. With a full understanding of my poetic history, the form and content of this current work will not only be understood in context, but become more interesting as an evolutionary study. I will discuss the different trends and themes I see working in my poetry. I will show how melding prose and poetry creates a new poetic style designed to engage a larger potential audience than free verse or formalist poetry. Finally I will discuss what this collection hopes to do as a whole.

The poetry in this collection is separated into three sections. The first section, titled “Knots” is a collection of what I refer to as poems that consist of a length of one or several segments—meant to be taken in visually, absorbed from a page and understood in its linear storyline. The second section, titled “How To Tie A Noose,” is a collection of thematically similar pieces: antagonistic, morally flawed characters in simple, innocent settings. “Tripwire,” the third section of this collection, showcases the interim poems written while still considering the overall point of this project. These poems discuss social, political and personal conflictions, and represent my growth as a poet and my continual learning process within the field of creative writing. —Shantel Grace
Dedicated

To Tim, and the semicolon
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Bound in Twine
An Introduction

From hate mail to mailbox money

I wrote my first poem in Joann Eller’s garage. She was my babysitter and her husband chose the only other kid in the house—a boy named Kevin—to go fishing instead of me. I “got it” right away. My cowboy boots were too pink for fishing. I snuck off to the garage with a Garfield notepad and a purple sparkle pen and wrote a poem titled, “Dead Worms,” which I then stuffed into my babysitter’s mailbox, addressed to her husband. Today, one might classify that poem as a terrorist threat, but at the time, it was exactly what I needed to process my being left out due to my gender. I found power in that poem, and writing it solidified my thoughts and emotions into something I could participate in. It’s true that the pugnacious girl from my childhood exists today, however, in my creative work, I’m less preoccupied with gender rules so much as genre rules.

I spend a lot of time thinking about poetry and fiction, wondering why it has so fully captured my attention. I ask myself if creative writing is worthy of a vocation. Does it make any difference? I’m conflicted by the answers, and often wonder why I didn’t fall in love with organic chemistry or some other field with outcomes that are measurable. I understand that poetry doesn’t Feed the Children, but it does require a person to pay close attention to the world, which may have a residual effect. My work places a considerable emphasis on the need for continuous inner conversation, and because of this, I’m learning about the depth of my identity, the depth of my attention, and about the rewards of paying attention in a world that is always unrest. This isn’t to say that the poems in this collection are about me, but they are internal conversations I often have with memory.
My mother’s dinner parties, my grandfather’s tobacco spit-cups, the first time I purchased a lottery ticket, the first song I wrote, women I met in jail—these are moments in my life I have trouble recalling even though I know they were real. And that’s one of the things I’m exploring in this collection—what does it look like to remember? And what does it look like when experience manipulates our memories?

The richness of what I am reading adds clarity to who I am, suggesting that the cliché is true: that what we read is a reflection of who we are. A personal example of this is the metaphorical memoir, *Lying*, written by Lauren Slater, which I read this past winter. She forces readers to redraw the boundary between what we know as fact and what we believe through the creation of our own personal fictions. I love this. She mixes memoir with mendacity, memories of her childhood with spurious neurological disturbances. Slater’s creative examination of her youth questions the reliability of the memoir altogether, and chapter one is structured with one telling sentence: “I exaggerate.”

Slater goes on to tell about her epilepsy, a condition that we come understand as both a reality and as a metaphor. She explains about her Jewish background in the upper Northeast, her controlling mother, Hebrew school, and a stint at a Catholic convent in Topeka, Kansas, where experts in epilepsy taught young girls *how to fall*. Slater writes,

> The whole point of this school was falling, not nuns. When we weren’t in classes with them, we were in the gym with the physical therapists. Epilepsy is a dangerous disease in which you have to learn to crash. We started in water. We stepped into a warm, heavily chlorinated pool, and we learned to let ourselves go in that, drifting backward, our hair coming out
as kelp…I was a lily too. I could fall in water. The pool was warm and I angled back into its embrace, into the brine of a body, her body, mother. I could go there (Slater, 48-49).

I use this example to illustrate Slater’s creative technique. She takes the genre of the memoir and wraps it in fiction, uses poetic language, and chronicles her life through carefully selected or finely constructed memories.

Sister Maria was the first to trip…And then, just like that, still laughing, maybe giddy on the excess of weather, Sister Maria pushed at Sister Agnes, who in turn threw a scoop of snow at Sister Katherine, and in the snap of some of the strangest seconds I’ve ever seen, this holy place became a beach party, a white-water fight, laughter, and laughter, and laughter, it caught, was fire, and I felt the glow in my chest…I sprinted out the door and whooped with delight, it was war, it was peace, it was wet, it was warm…to this day I don’t know which sister it was who pushed me down, but down I went, the holy hand moving me down, falling onto ground, and all the snow was singing. And so it was that I learned how to fall” (Slater, 52).

Lying questions the reliability of the memoir, the trickiness of remembering, and the slippery nature of writing about it and then categorizing it as anything but fiction. In her work, Slater explores the mind, a body, and a life under siege, and whether it is possible to tell, or know, the facts about a self. This creative exploration is something I
accidentally began to emulate in my own work. I happened to take it one step further, however, manipulating fiction’s form to suit the needs of my poetry.

**It Started with Hay**

My early poetry attempts ended in songwriting. I was thirteen, sitting in my grandfather’s wheat truck, when I found my first song lodged in the back of my throat and I scribbled a few words on the back of an elevator receipt. My lyrics were trite, the melody simple, and the result was a $50 check and a plastic trophy from a talent show at the county fair. For the next seventeen years, songwriting became my safety net. It sometimes paid the rent. It occasionally paid my utilities, and eventually, in a very romantic twist, a few of my more popular songs became ring-tones on Nokia phones in Istanbul and Mexico. And that turned into a modest amount of mailbox money, which paid for the first year of my Master’s degree at UH, where I’ve returned full circle to writing poetry. When I think about the challenges I faced as a professional songwriter, I can see a parallel with the challenges I now face as a creative writer—genre mixing. Commercially speaking, cross-genre songs aren’t something a music publisher looks for in a writer. A songwriter should be focused on “voice” and the rules by which the genre is defined. I happened to fall into a genre with more limitations than any other—three chords and the truth—or otherwise known as Country Music. Perhaps my rebelliousness toward genres in creative writing stems from these experiences. What I know for sure, is that I draw much of my desire for blending poetry and prose from the experiences I had as a musician, the limitations I felt as a songwriter, and from a childhood fascination with…string.
As a teenager I worked weekends and summers on the family farm, and April was the season for alfalfa, a foraging crop that superficially resembles clover, with clusters of small purple flowers and the glutinous smell of honeysuckle pudding. I learned about the significance of twine in these alfalfa fields. We’d cut and bale the hay, and then bring trucks onto the freshly cut fields where we’d then throw and stack them for a summer vacation in the sweltering hayloft at the top of an old limestone barn. Once, after the bales had been harvested, and they looked like massive cubes of marijuana, we noticed the baling twine was missing. Imagine an ice cube that isn’t quite frozen enough, or a homemade brick that isn’t nearly dry enough. Without the twine, the bales crumbled in our arms. You simply couldn’t achieve the desired result without both components working together. Pun intended, everything went haywire, and we were left with bouncy clumps of itchy hay.

Another memory I have where twine takes center stage is of an eighth-grade class field trip to Cawker City, Kansas. We took in some natural history museums, a dairy or two, and lucky for us, we stopped at the World’s Largest Ball of Twine. It weighed 5,000 pounds and stood eight feet tall. It looked dingy and dirty, and looking back, it was a scene from *Napoleon Dynamite*. I remember distinctly how it smelled. I smelled drought. I smelled thick light. I smelled pointlessness. And besides the smell, I saw construction. It was mechanical looking, and I could tell right away that the winding of the ball of twine was very tricky. One loose step and you’ve got a mess on your hands. When wrapped incorrectly, twine easily unravels along the outside, and one false pull of a loose string and it collapses entirely. The key, according to the tour guide, is never taking your eyes off the ball. Wind the ball in a thick rotating motion at first, then let it thin out. Wind it
again, loosely, and by memory, and then let it thin out again. There is no resolution. The ball ends where and when you want it to end.

Eventually, a town in Wisconsin won the title of the World’s Largest Ball of Twine, and I remember thinking about the sad runner-up, sitting in Cawker City, with the pungent smell of moist rot. My memory of the class field trip is actually pretty vague, and although I’d like to think I’ve recalled it correctly, the truth is, I’m not even sure if we stopped in Cawker City. How our memories converge with information is something I’m trying to explore in this collection. I like the idea of using the memoir as a catalyst in my poetry, like the root string, which if pulled, may result in the collapse of the story. The paragraphs in my poems are often structured formally in fiction, but I like to thin them out and wrap them in silence. I like what this does to a story’s imagery, its space, and breath, its overall reliability. And its ending.

**Who We Meet Along the Way Matters**

As one of the only forms of public communication that struggles financially (although we might also include journalism here), poetry is, in my opinion, one of the few media that can be trusted to represent “information” and “truth” regardless of the breaking even X-factor. I realize many poets disagree, for example, W.S. Merwin, who says, “Poetry is not information.” But I believe in the visceral resonance of poetry, and I pay attention to poetry that offers an historical account of human experiences coupled with a criticism of our surroundings. In *Bound in Twine*, I’m interested in exploring a means of representation as understood by practicing the art of braiding together poetry, and fiction, and memoir, in order to create something that cannot be expressed solo.
Besides authors like Lauren Slater, who often combine the three elements I’m working with, I’m still on the hunt for an author who also breaks down fiction’s form into poetry. I’m certainly not suggesting that I’m pioneering this technique, I’m simply still searching for those who’ve successfully mastered the technique so that I can learn more about what it is that I’m attempting to do. For now, I’ll continue to reflect on those poets and authors whose work greatly influences my writing.

It was a graduate poetry class that brought me, willingly, into the worlds of Gertrude Stein, Ezra Pound, Marianne Moore and Hart Crane. I loved hearing words *live*. And as a musician, I was especially influenced by the sounds of Stein’s poems. Rhythm and cadence, experimentation with pattern, were all things I felt compelled to learn more about. From *Tender Buttons* in a section called “Objects,” Stein writes about “Dirt And Not Copper”:

Dirt and not copper makes a color darker. It makes the shape so heavy and makes no melody harder.

It makes mercy and relaxation and even a strength to spread a table fuller. There are more places not empty. They see cover.

I choose to talk specifically about *Tender Buttons* because it was once criticized as being a collection of confusing gibberish, an intentional hoax, and besides the fact that I completely disagree, I like the fact that Stein defied conventional syntax. She manipulated and confronted objects, which are external to us, and her experiments in prose gave writers like me permission to continue experimenting. Maybe it was her
rebelliousness toward composition, or perhaps it was her divergence from cultural norms and gender roles, but something about Stein’s poetry held my attention during the process of learning what I could allow myself to do as a poet. Stein felt that emotion itself shouldn’t be the source of literature, but rather, writing should, “consist of an exact reproduction of either an outer or an inner reality” (Furgeson, 115–116). This idea had a particular resonance with me, but one that didn’t impact my work until I abandoned poetry for fiction.

Through my own experimentation, and by comparing my poems with those poets whose work I admired, I realized that my poems weren’t earth shaking by any means. But the iambic pentameter and rhyme scheme of my third attempt at a sonnet were right on point—a moment of success that stayed with me. Still, I was frustrated that I couldn’t produce the same images in poetry as I could in songwriting. Imagery was, for me, melody, and rhythm, and verse, and the experience of my work up until that point had been a musical one. As a newly ambitious graduate student, I stole from my songwriting in order to create something new in poetry, but the result usually lacked in something significant. Sometimes it was too much breath, or space. Sometimes it was a misunderstanding of rhythm and tone. And nearly all the time it was an image I felt I could successfully produce with an instrument, but felt I couldn’t produce with a pen. In other words, I felt that I had failed as a poet. Not because I didn’t have the sufficient support and intellectual guidance, but because my poetry felt generic. I quickly turned to fiction in hopes of producing a fuller, more contextualized picture.

Although I don’t have the same affection for the short story genre as I do the novel, short stories gave me something new and tangible to work with. I liked Joyce’s
“Araby” for his poetic language and his ability to take a less than desirable neighborhood and infuse it with children’s play, resulting in an almost magical experience of North Richmond Street.

The cold air stung us and we played till our bodies glowed. Our shouts echoed in the silent street. The career of our play brought us through the dark muddy lanes behind the houses where we ran the gauntlet of the rough tribes from the cottages, to the back doors of the dark dripping gardens where odours arose from the ashpits, to the dark odorous stables where a coachman smoothed and combed the horse or shook music from the buckled harness (W.G., 180).

In his story, children are very aware of an adult world, and a drab life is illuminated by imagination. By the time we reach the bazaar, we experience an idealized image of the world, then anger, then the coiling effect of disillusionment.

Flannery O’Connor’s short stories gave me the idea to combine familiar rural settings with grotesque characters—namely one of my grandfathers—and further compelled me to examine my own questions of morality, ethics, and religion. Although her landscapes (physically and metaphorically) have much to do with the Deep South and Catholic-based religious ideals—and mine have more to do with the central Midwest and Protestant-based ideals—I felt a connection to her prose, her morally flawed characters, her depictions of rural America. During this exploration of O’Connor, Joyce, Kafka, Hemingway and others, I felt that fiction fit me like a tight, wool coat. It kept me warm,
but I popped a lot of buttons. With regards to my own writing, I wanted to give characters shape, and I wanted to offer the story a certain linear fullness, but I wanted the excitement and unpredictability of form, which led me back to poetry. I couldn’t seem to find these qualities in much of the fiction I was reading, perhaps because I stuck closely to stories rooted in realism. I wanted the unreliability of the memoir. So I pressed on, searching for my “voice” in a non-fiction workshop.

Finally, I found something worth writing about. This isn’t to say that everyone participating in the workshop liked my work, but they questioned my form in a way that forced me to defend what I was trying to accomplish. They supported my recalcitrant ideas about genre mixing, and they examined the parts of my writing that were still problematic: too much poetic language; an unreliability of my characters; a sometimes reckless use of tone and style; and a rebellious attitude towards punctuation. Overall, the reception toward my work—although very much straddling the lines between non-fiction and everything else—was very positive, but also complicated and wading in grey matter. What sealed the idea for this collection was an in-class conversation on how un-cool, or perhaps I should say, “dated,” the semicolon had become. It was the MySpace of punctuation. It’s like imitation vanilla extract. Nobody uses it anymore. So I revised my work. I omitted a hundred offenses where the semicolon showed up “irresponsibly” in my work. But then I felt that something was lost. And so I argued, What about Woolf’s The Mark on the Wall (24 offenses), or Kew Gardens (21 offenses)? What changes when one replaces Woolf’s semi-colon with a period? Or a comma? I tried it, and the answer is, everything.
The semicolon is a simple piece of punctuation that follows clear rules. It’s the super-comma, connecting two or more independent clauses together into one sentence. But in my work, it’s the pause that I’m reaching for. From the poem, “For There She Was,” found in chapter two of this collection, I’ll demonstrate my point,

Even now, at this hour, still driving, discreet old farmers were shooting their guns, performing errands of mystery. Women in houses were dusting televisions and canning beets and boiling berries for jam; women with small drawers in desks filled with sea-green brooches in eighteenth-century settings, love letters and sentimental perfume bottles, scented stationary, and certificates of being born, all tempting us to recognize vanity for what it isn’t. How strange, that on this day, after arriving to the house, upon entering the kitchen, the silence, the humidity, the hum, the slow percolating of coffee, what should return to the scene but cauliflower.

In sticky cabinets she locates minced garlic and olive oil, parsley and pepper and Parmesan; she turns the oven dial to two hundred-twenty degrees on one side, four hundred-fifty on the other. A pad of butter is warmed and spread on glass as if to frost the windows in winter, for decoration; tenderly, she cuts the flowers from the thick stalk and gently places them in similar shapes,

on glass;

the flowers blanketed in herbs and oil.
In this example, the semicolon protects the relationship between women canning beets and women storing eighteenth century brooches in dusty furniture drawers. It’s the pause between the Parmesan and the pad of butter, the connecting point between a metaphorical decoration of flowers blanketed in herbs and oil, and a mother’s obsession with perfection and composure. Controlling the run-on effect is something the semi-colon performs, and it says something important about the mark on the wall, about the tongue-shaped leaves, about the voice behind the pen, and the experiences behind the voice. My defense of the semicolon isn’t a justification of making long lists, or that it allows me to write poems in prose, but rather a defense of the writer’s relationship to words, and to silence. Even Stein once suggested that words are the fabric of writing, and all the ideas, feelings, and “something elses” don’t count for anything if we lack awareness and are unable to deliberately use words in relation to their sounds, meanings, and feelings. Semicolon’s current imprisonment compelled me to set it free in my work. I wanted to explore the parts of speech, and in particular, this punctuation mark that makes an argument about one’s relationship to a word, one’s connection to an idea and another idea, an object or multiple objects. Thus, my relationship with the “pause” became a philosophical basis for the inclusion of the naughty symbol in my creative work. It’s a picture of my material and spiritual worlds; the marriage between me and poem. It is how I respond to words and ideas internally, and it shows up when deployed externally in the act of my writing.

When I look at what Woolf’s fiction, and what my favorite poets’ poetry can do, I’m often frustrated with what little mine accomplishes. I see Stevens (A glass aswarm with things going as far as they can) and e.e. Cummings (When the world is puddle-
moving freely between form and free verse, engaging us with the shape of a word, and the limitlessness of imagery. The frustration I felt was due a feeling of being constricted in fiction. So with the help of these poets I loosened the reins a bit and imagery became my greatest pursuit. After finding the style of imagery I was aiming for, I began to understand why form exists, why punctuation exists, and why I tend not to subscribe entirely to skeleton and spine. I wanted to fulfill my stories’ needs, and I learned that with regards to many of the poems chosen for this collection, I needed the linearity of fiction, the freedom of poetry, the unreliability of the memoir, and the musicality of the secular hymn.

**Examining the Workbench**

Now at the culmination of my graduate experience, I realize that each story has its own needs. In my poetry, these needs are met occasionally by free verse, and occasionally by form, and more often than not, by a careful braiding of prose and poem. The subjects of my stories vary from gambling priests to extreme representations of the grandfather figure, to snapshots of women in jail, and snakes in concert halls. Being raised a Presbyterian, the ideas of Heaven and Hell, The Faithful and The Unfaithful, The Martyr and The Sinner, always proved to be fertile breeding grounds for my work. My earlier pursuits in songwriting responded to these themes and became a comfortable place for me to examine my values and beliefs. But I can’t deny that the impetus for much of my early creative work was based in entertainment. To write a song was to perform that song. And although the “performance” of my work has changed over the years, the idea of entertaining someone is still very much a part of why I do what I do. This isn’t to say
that I’m offering a reader a chance to escape into a light-hearted story, but I am hoping to offer a divertingly adventurous experience, one that holds a reader’s attention, and can be consumed and digested at a reasonable pace. For example, in the first poem titled, “For There She Was,” I’m tendering instant recognition of Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*. In my poem, it is the portrait of a woman named after my mother, who is and isn’t my mother, and is laced in unreliable memories. As Mrs. Ringler readies her house for a party, memories flood the narrator’s mind, and she is awash in the sensations of recalling the past. How I am defining “entertainment” is how I define a lyrical passage of memory—both offer something that amuses, pleases, diverts.

In his *Defense of Poesy*, Sir Phillip Sidney claimed, poetry is “an art of imitation…that is to say a representing, counterfeiting, or figuring forth” (958). He believed that literature’s importance is to enlighten, entertain and educate, “It is not an art of lies, but of true doctrine; not of effeminateness, but of notable stirring of courage; not of abusing man’s wit, but of strengthening man’s wit; not banished, but honored” (968). Also known as *An Apology for Poetry*, Sidney defends that idea by combining the excitement of history with the ethical focus of philosophy, explaining that a poem can rouse its readers to virtue, something I’m not sure I entirely accept. However, I do understand and accept his claims that method and style are key components to overcoming the problem of censorship. Sidney defends fiction in terms of entertainment, and I find this most compelling. He argues that the poet makes no literal claims of truth, that the poet is under no illusions, but still creates a sense of fiction as true as any other, and this argument leaves me thinking about the overall goals of my collection.
I believe there is an excitement that exists within the blending of poetry and fiction that cannot exist on its own. I believe my poetry is doing something new. But just like concocting new flavors of the Cannoli, some purists will consider the experiment blasphemous, hopefully others will find that it’s a modern interpretation of the Sicilian pastry. My goal is to represent poetic and metaphoric language experiences found in dreams, reveries, childhood fantasies and free associations. In other words, I’m hoping to delve into what we know as memory, and what we think we know.

Perhaps it’s because Michael Ondaatje’s poetry and fiction draw on the style of jazz that I’m interested in his fusion techniques. He once practiced the exorcism of poetry, an exercise aimed at confirming and refining approaches to writing. In *Coming Through Slaughter*, Ondaatje represents and complicates a fusion of kinetic artforms and the physical rhythms on which they hang. This integration has made his writing more tangible and accessible to me, and is something that I attempt to emulate in my own way. The story is fragmented, syncopated, with episodes extending into elongated riffs, and because of this, his story isn’t just a “good read,” but rather, I react to it in the same way I react to jazz: The structure is wonderfully uncomfortable and wild and schizophrenic, radical and erratic. He departs from real facts to explore the relationship between creativity and self-destruction. He lurches into scenes that have little to do with the scene beforehand, and his poetic language and fragmented sentences offer the reader a drug-like experience. And this is it for me—the coming together of poem and fiction. He is doing something that I’ve rarely found anyone else doing. He has an agenda. And I do too. For me, it’s the act of surprise, and the experience of sound and experimental form. I’m conscious of the fact that the line breaks in my work will be uncomfortable for
formal fiction readers, and that the linearity of my prose may be uncomfortable for some poets, but I’m hoping that the twining of the two will keep readers engaged, and hopefully entertained by the histories represented in my work, and the personal histories reflected upon by the reader.

**The Baling Effect**

*Bound in Twine* is organized in three sections: *Knots*, *How to Tie a Noose*, and *Tripwire*. In *Knots*, I’ve chosen poems with linear story lines interwoven in poetry. Some poems consist of a length of one or several segments. These segments are sometimes webbed in multiple storylines, but still bound to one subject. What’s important to me in this section is how the knots are tied—some with properties that make it possible for a range of outcomes, others are staked, finished, bound to constrict an ending. And some knots, like in the poem, “Writes of Song,” are intended to be decorative, bound to themselves to produce an attractive pattern. I like the idea of a thickening of information, and then a thinning of the poem that eventually drops into silence. I’m not looking for a formal ending, but I am a proponent of a strong and musically sound last note. In terms of content, the poems selected for this section are consistent in tone, voice, and a feeling of tightness. The reaction I have when reading these poems is that of the hard lump that gets stuck in the back of one’s throat before she decides whether or not to cry or to tough it out until later.

The poems selected for *How to Tie a Noose* use the technique of knots in order to make the poem collapsible. These are poems that are threatened by the blending of prose and poem. Rope is placed under or just behind the poem’s form, and the force is
supposed to break something, yet non-jamming knots tend to resist attempts to loosening it. Key themes found in these poems are those of legal abuse, social neglect, and the mirroring of cruelty from parent to child to animal to nature. Like Flannery O’Connor, I’m interested in exploring grotesque characters, or at the very least, those with flawed morality, and these subjects show up in each of the poems in this chapter. I’m also interested in exploring those subjects whom we believe are flawed, but are simply misunderstood, anti-heroes but still good people. The setting in these poems is often rural, simple, and filled with religious and political contradictions.

Finally, in the third section, called *Tripwire*, I’ve selected poems that are intended as a passive triggering mechanism. Real poems. In other words, formal poems which have less to do with the fusion of prose and poetry, and more to do with detecting, detaching, and reacting to an experience. These are a culmination of the in-between moments I spent during the exploration of cross-genre writing. During each individual search for a poet who was doing exactly what I was doing, I ended up with nothing, and my passion for this project began to soften. But these poems drew me back, again, to storytelling, and to the idea that experimentation in literature can produce tangible results. Thus, *Bound in Twine* was born. These interim poems reflect how I felt about being constricted, about the rules and regulations of storytelling, and because of this, I felt that the poems in *Tripwire* needed to be a part of this collection.

The primary concern of this collection is to offer something unexpected and surprising to the reader, and the chance to think about the remembering of self, rather than the experiencing of self. I sound like a metaphysical poet, but I am aware of the
ironies of my work, that using complex metaphors and lofty imagery persuades a reader to believe something is unexpected and surprising when in fact, it isn’t. But what I hope this collection offers is a certain incongruity, an inconsistency in form that becomes consistent in style, a bizarreness of characters and a clash between setting and story. I’m interested in creating a literary ball of twine—starting with one genre, and interweaving another, finally forming a roundness of fiction, poetry, and memoir. My vulnerability is to the investigation of the language, and to unreliability of the memory, and I hope that by exposing these liabilities, that readers will think about what influences our memories, and the way we report our experiences.

—Shantel Grace
Works Cited


“When a word starts to buzz, it vibrates everywhere—as soon as ‘convergence’ was in the air, the world seemed to be full of things that called out to be described by it. There were now interdisciplinary scientific fields like neurolinguistics and sociobiology; new musical styles like Afropop, jazz-funk, and just plain ‘world’; new entertainment genres like infomercials and advertorials. The popularity of such portmanteau words is a sign of the current fascination with hybrids and convergences.”

—Geoffrey Nunberg, linguistics professor at Stanford University and usage editor of the American Heritage Dictionary
Knots
For There She Was

Mrs. Ringler said she would buy the cauliflower herself. For my father had his work cut out for him. The windows would be taken off their hinges; Dalloway’s men were coming. And then, she thought, Mrs. Ringler,

my mother,

what an afternoon—warm as if issued to spring on its first day in April. What a day! What a steal of sunshine! For so it nearly always seemed to her, when, with a little lift of the window seal, which she could feel now, she had pushed the screen out and left the house open to the world.

How still, how fresh.
How perfectly clear.

My mother was having a party.

She wore a green pair of pants, the color of tea, and a lemony blouse with pearl buttons shaped like half moons. Lipstick was her last and most precious accessory. Always, she would wear lipstick, and when we parked in front of the IGA, I wondered,

what did the lipstick mean?

In the early afternoon, cool, then warm, like the rising and falling of a sheet, a woman of forty-five stood in front of electric doors, in a town twenty miles from where we lived, where cauliflower was a brighter shade of white. Something awful was about to happen. Looking at the flowery cabbage, its tint of yellow, its speckles of brown, I, musing around other vegetables, felt that I preferred mud to cauliflower.

My mother carefully inspected the vegetable’s inflorescence. She picked the one almost
nearly to the back of the cooler, and tenderly pushed some of her hair behind her ear where cultured pearls remained hidden. I watched her smile at people who passed her in narrow aisles, and I wondered if she’d invite them to her party.

If not them, who?

“Forty-nine dollars and twelve cents,” a woman says, and I wonder if that’s a lot, or not a lot. By the way my mother inspects her receipt, as we push the cart toward the car, I find my question answered. Forty-nine dollars and twelve cents, the price of one month’s electricity bill. The price of driving to town forty times. The price of my father’s best pair of winter boots.

The cost, I wasn’t sure.

For having lived in Sylvan Grove—how many years now?—over twenty, one feels this even in the midst of dirt roads, or in front of small town grocery stores, or in the suspense of giving a party. Kansas was in that moment, just before spring, in a time when snow could fall as easily as tulips could rise up from frozen earth. The war had not begun, except for small ones, where nice boys were killed but not talked about. The King and I played in theatres, not in my town. I remember tasting the colors of monks’ robes, sweet cherries, seeing elephants, watching the way the bald woman smiled when her lover’s head was sliced from his neck. Hers soon followed and I knew, that that was love.

“Will you help me with the china?” my mother says, staring ahead as if she’s already begun cutting her vegetables, preparing the soufflé. A well of tears, courage and endurance, a perfectly upright combination of sensation, would lift me into the sunlit room where plates were on display like the opening of a bazaar. I would handle them with the late age of ten years experience. Obedience, like the color of my eyes,
was bred in me,

shelved things,

which were unbroken.

Even now, at this hour, still driving, discreet old farmers were shooting their guns, performing errands of mystery. Women in houses were dusting televisions and canning beets and boiling berries for jam; women with small drawers in desks filled with sea-green brooches in eighteenth-century settings, love letters and sentimental perfume bottles, scented stationary, and certificates of being born, all tempting us to recognize vanity for what it isn’t. How strange, that on this day, after arriving to the house, upon entering the kitchen, the silence, the humidity, the hum, the slow percolating of coffee, what should return to the scene

but cauliflower.

In sticky cabinets she locates minced garlic and olive oil, parsley and pepper and Parmesan; she turns the oven dial to two hundred-twenty degrees on one side, four hundred-fifty on the other. A pad of butter is warmed and spread on glass as if to frost the windows in winter, for decoration; tenderly, she cuts the flowers from the thick stalk and gently places them in similar shapes,

on glass;

the flowers blanketed in herbs and oil.

So she would find herself arguing in the aroma of roasted cauliflower, still making out that I would wear the plaid skirt, green tights, black shoes. And so she dressed me like old-fashioned candy. And it was intolerable, and when it came to that scene in the little
hallway by the stairway, I had to break with her or I would have been destroyed, both of us ruined, I was convinced. Never could I understand how she cared.

I felt very young,

at the same time unspeakably aged.

She sliced a knife through everything. Mushrooms were cut and stuffed with crab and cheese, asparagus split and drizzled in buttery cream, pork was sliced, cubed and seared, crusted in syrup, and I knew nothing.

No language, no history,

only the memoirs of others.

The table would look like Christmas. Small notes, poems on plates the color of champagne bottles, ornamented its empty futility. Baskets of warm bread and lavender colored napkins; she had a perpetual sense of being out, of being far out to sea and alone with her plates. I, in my candy costume held platters of zucchini flowers fried and stuffed with ricotta as a surprise, as filling, as a gift. Its ineffectiveness astounded me. It felt very, very dangerous to live on that day. A few twigs of knowledge, it was absorbing, all this, the farm trucks passing by, the shiny cars stopping in our driveway, fine china and a poem were my plate, and I would say to myself, am I this, am I that?

Then there are the guests, the Dawdy’s and Donehue’s and the Dorvzacks’ covered dishes. There are Mrs. Hands’ kolaches and a plastic container filled with frozen icing, Mr. Kempt’s pickled garlic, Mr. Tilltoton’s lamb skewers, all spread out over the table.
Ever so many plates there are, but none, which seem exactly right for the town in which they would be eaten. Nothing would amuse the usual indescribably dried-up women, except interminable talk of Mr. Malgan, his poor wife, Rebecca, and his trip to England, the affair with his student who wore too much eye shadow, and a small ring in her left nostril.

“She used to love horses,” they would say, nodding their “poor thing” heads, sipping white wine.

How much my mother wanted it, the people who looked pleased, never annoyed, and even though it seemed silly to have reasons for doing things—waiting to eat, waiting to wash crystal, throwing half-eaten deviled eggs to dogs—we followed her as if we wanted it too.

Her eyes crumple like soft leather at the sight of my father, his boots.

Slow and stately, her voice rather large, like the politics of men, with her country house, dignified, asks him to please “change your shoes.”

His “shoes” belonged on the table, I thought, next to buttercream cakes and the birds of paradise tea set, his shoes belonged there. That he held himself well was true, he was dressed well, considering he spent little, but there was the subject of the boots. The body he wore was not the body of all its capacities, there were no more children now, a son in a blue and red costume, in another country; a daughter in denial, in college and open like colorful air; and then there was me, the oddest sense of being invisible, unseen, unknown, uniformed, but in solemn progress.

“I like his boots,” I say, choosing to participate in a war I didn’t believe in. “That’s what he is. That’s what he does. He wears boots.”
“What does that even mean?” she whispers, beside the stairway, away from the gathering of appropriately shoed people. “Just once I’d like to pretend I didn’t marry a farmer.”

Tears well.

“Why?” I ask.

“That is all,” she says, wiping her hands on a thin, yellow towel. “That is all,” she repeats, louder, pausing for a moment at the window, where outside, thick white snow covers bales of winter straw and early tulips.

She looks relieved.

My shoes, black leather with a red button in the center, hurt my feet. I walk up the stairway, quietly, and peek at my father who sits at the edge of the bed, polishing his boots. I lean hard against the door.

“Honey, will you grab me those brown loafers from the hall closet?” he asks.

I feel defeated,

my knees itch,

I scratch a hole in my tights, and dab it with a wet cloth, as if it were a day for miracles. I walk through the upstairs hallway and open the sad closet door. There, the loafers remind me that the whole house smells of tar. The stuffy smell lingers and I feel sick, inclined to say something. But it is only a phase, I am neither a hero, nor a student. Inside the bedroom, he and his boots are inseparable, and the snow, which begins to fall harder, which I can feel through the window, dulls my conflicted feelings.
“Here you go,” I say, handing him the softly tortured loafers.

“Did you go to town today?” he asks.

“Yeah.”

“You and your mom get into anything interesting? Did you rob a bank or set the streets on fire? Anything newsworthy happen today?”

“We bought cauliflower.”

I watch him place his boots, in perfect alignment, just inches in front of the bed, his loafers on his lap next to the polishing rag.

“We’re eating!” she yells, from the stairway. “People are eating!” she says, walking quickly up the twenty-two yelping steps. “Put those things away and get your shoes on. Let’s go! You’re embarrassing me.”

She walks away, wiping her hands on a thin yellow towel. He picks up his boots. He sets his loafers on the floor in front of him. I watch him, and cover my knees with my hands. With his left foot, he pushes the loafers to the side, carefully,

he lifts his jeans above his knees,

and lifts his legs from the floor, and drops his feet inside the polished boots. Again.

Denim falls around them, holds them in place. He stands and walks toward me, lifts me, piggy-back,

he walks.
Down the stairway, through the kitchen, past plates of cauliflower soufflé, and frosted kolaches and split asparagus, we become the heroes of our own lives. The scene rasps her, though to have stirring about her kitchen in these brutal shoes and torn tights, to hear twigs cracking and hooves planted down in the depths of a dirt-encumbered forest, her soul, never quite content, or quite secure, her illness her empty plates, their power to make her feel, lingers. Our limbs, her hurt spine, made all pleasure in beauty disappear, quiver, bend as if we were monsters, content in nothing but hatred of soles.

Year in and year out she hated those boots, for it was not her one vice, a slum without a cushion, a room without a rug, a small corner table without a lamp, in time, dissolved. For no doubt, with another throw of the dice, he might’ve worn polished loafers, shiny, visible refined shoes.

And then, opening her eyes, one April morning, years later, her body limp from the loss of a tumorous organ, how fresh she was, like clean linen and roses, holding her head up. Sweet peas and strawberries in a ceramic bowl on the kitchen table, she looked happy.

For there she was.

Arum lilies in a vase, gray-white moths spinning in lofty corners of the house, my father’s boots in the doorway, his sweater warming his shoulders, his socks warming his feet, her smile, neither defeated nor victorious.
I watched from a chair,
tasting plump red sweetness
break open in my mouth. I am this, and I am that.
Flies buzz in morning’s light.

I turn on my side, in my childhood bedroom, and listen to the sound of their wings.

Sunlight drinks me in and I feel thirsty.

The book lay on my dresser, a pen lost in an avalanche of thin cotton, and outside the window,

the weather;

I feel fog on my wrists.

The windows might as well have been painted grey—the last words I read the night before, they come to me now, and seem just as honest as if I had written them.

Bricks hang from my eyelids; I drift.

There is a wedding;

I am neither the bride nor a guest.

The music is not of my time, but I listen as if I know the words.

I came to these mountains as a girl, in hopes of finding relief from what stole my mother’s lungs from her;

a half dozen handkerchiefs a day with blood; no!

That is the book, not my own words.

I came to these mountains as a young woman, in hopes of finding what stole my mother’s hand from her;

a white farmhouse, a lie about what lies beneath it, a promise of three stories and a fine dining room and a fence around a yard, which remains green,

like poem.

Poem kisses my neck, not the groom nor a guest, nor a hero.
Not a man named Nathan or Steve,
not a woman named Sophie,
not a name that sounds like the others.

Poem comes to me,
poem’s face is my face,
poem’s tongue feels like my tongue and the kiss is irrelevant.

What I know is that I am not in a dream, but I am colored like a dream.

Bricks fall from my eyes and I hear flies again. I’ve married poem.

First darkness, then rain.

There was not moonlight.

Poem and I drove into the black, trusting our horse not to fall over the rocky ledge.

Montana is where I loved poem.
There were no naked bodies, just music; unclothed words.
We were unplayed, our sentences stripped.

We were B-sides.

We held hands and that was enough;

my red shirt, poem’s brown eyes, the way poem pushed my hair behind my ear and touched the back of my neck with, quiet.

Poem said goodbye and I said nothing.

I watched poem release itself into the snow.

There is a division, a separation; I grieve for the music.

There is a warfare of conscience.
My eyes see the wings, now.

I hear nothing but fog.

I am unplayed.

I sit on the bed. I stand on my childhood desk, knowing my dreams exaggerate,
This, my stage now, I focus my attention on a hand mirror, I am dazzled by light, the walls command me. A glass case in the center of my room is filled with bones,

blue glow, and empty books.

I am an animated corpse and the book is poem, and fog is song, and pen is stage.

I smell dried corn,
old wood,
falling water,

Beams of atmosphere fill my lungs before I sing, and then I see poem, again.

Poem’s eyelashes, the hair on poem’s arms,
they are the dessert,
the peg of poem’s chair whittled in dust.

These notes are not of my mouth.

I feel my cheeks rise and my throat open; I sing with my gut, instead of my nose.

Poem sweats through poem’s shirt,
the smell is of wet pottery.

My fingers cut the strings wound around metal pegs on a wooden tool, and with some disappointment, I watch the sun indicate the afternoon and I pray it turns evening,
slowly.

Poem would’ve long since eaten. The bass line is too low to listen.

We sit together, quietly, me and poem,
I pull melody through poem’s body with the needle I’ve saved.

I hear clocks ticking and knuckles knocking on a box.

We are a childless couple, retaining an air of romance as the barren often do. Our courting was never brought to a close. Sweet partners. There is nothing remarkable about our ease until it ends,

in three-four time.
Returning to where first leaves spring

We must wait for May to show itself,
said my grandfather,
coming in from the porch.

It’s almost too spring to see,
I said, and he laughed and I smiled, knowing I couldn’t fool his internal season.

One can hardly tell which is winter
and which
is the inbetween.

You mean the tulips? I asked, and he nodded, yes and no and I’m not sure.

I mean the tulips and the color of the air and the way my hands ache and the way
soil smells,
like aging skin.

So with our coats hung,
the sun swallowed,
thin drops of rain, awkwardly knocking on the roof,
I walked into the den where he sat in his blue coffee stained chair;

his silver shirt buttons threatening to un SNAP;

his cheeks watermelon pink;

he drifted in and out of an airy consciousness,

and I waited.

Through the keyhole on the front door I could see a downpouring of weather,
immense darkness,
sharp wind.

The window blinds annoyed,
the furniture confounded,
I told a joke to the nothingness
which stirred.

I questioned wallpaper’s philosophy on plaster;
were we allies, were we enemies, were we disposed of, would we endure?

Random light uncovered sore hands,
leopard shapes and wild bony angles.

Empty boxes lie still on the dining room table,
pills in small bottles, sleeping,
lace curtains mocking the wind,
mail unopened and stacked, wearing the persistency of feathers
and ink,
and I think
it’s time for lemonade.

At length, I studied the space between this room and that room,
the dimming of one minute,
the sharpening of another,
the hollow wave of the space heater,
the dense chips on china.

Winter held us there,
in the inbetween;

no flowers, but tulips;

no birds, but crows;

no season, but winter;

clear planets and black letters on white sealed envelopes;

a million stars underneath the rain, but no moon,
divine stillness twitched.

The night would break into a calm that would never return,
Fragments of lilac fell onto my skin and drenched my clothing,
There should have been wind and destruction,
leaves and branches,
broken gutters and rain pipes,
and a plunging of fear;

maybe, a lighthouse.
Instead, the weather tossed itself—
as a siren singing—
into doubt and damp paths and solitude and bedclothes until
our ship wrecked and mermaids brushed their hair.

Four months
and seventeen days before
I wished I would’ve been in that room,
he is decayed,
in the den,
the one with the TV
and the blinds
and the blue coffee
stained chair,

the one where,
in the next room,
monies that were owed
remained stained and

melodically unopened.

In the frequency of the after life,
I see him planting tomatoes,
heirloom fruit;

ugly purple ones with green veins,
shaped like bruised fleshy bubbles.

In a place of longitude and vermiculture,
he will dig
and I will help him
scavenge for ripe manure
thick with earthworms and lessons;

ones I won’t learn until years from now.

Or now.

Or never.

They will decompose in purple light,

and then I will see him,
again,
and we will discuss balance
and proportion
and he will demonstrate himself
by adding too much manure
to a pot of marigolds,

and over the course of the summer
I will watch them
burn.

*Balance.*

I will apply the lesson of marigolds to sentimental unlearning,
to the slow burn of destruction;
of wanting too much beauty too fast.

We will discuss the spoony flower
that bursts through monotonous snow,
making love to the atmosphere,
defying rules of nature and beauty and art;

and I will remind him of the inbetween

and he will remind me that we are here, or there, already.

Now he is awake,
at his old place in the blue chair,
sitting lonely.

There is this expedition—
we are going to the place we’ve been already—
we will watch May undress;

I have forgotten to order the seeds; I have lost my temper, my directions.

*What’s the use of memory?*

*What did the seeds mean?*

I breathe in orange liquid,
and he returns to winter,
bursting through snow,
tapping my roof with his rain.
Clean cups in the sink; I have attachment here. A link that has been cut, now it floats; it is a salty stillness. In his house, where I return in spring, everything seems strange. Words become birds on yellow-green walls. I take his coffee cup, its rings permanently painted at the bottom, and I sit with it in the sun. Empty places fill with light and I think about heroes and martyrs and victims and saints and criminals and flapjacks and spades; he is none of these things, he is almost all of these things. Interruption escapes somewhere else.

First leaves reach toward the light; a foreground of a picture.

*Move to the middle,* I say,

I will paint it a thousand times.
How to Tie A Noose
Joint Problems

Chapter 1:
Holy shit I’m being arrested.

Chapter 2:
“Squat down and spread your legs like you’re a chicken.”

Chapter 3:
“Put your glasses on. They make you look more bitch. I mean, butch.”

Chapter 4:
This is about to get ugly.

Chapter 5:
“Excuse me sir, could you put me in the cell for cool girls?”

Chapter 6:
“Hey babe, it’s me. Would you find me a rock hammer?”

Chapter 7:
The Period of Duende

Chapter 8:
“Do you happen to have any pencils?”

Chapter 9:
What I learned …
Holy shit I’m being arrested.

My brain is lifting from my body. I smell the faint residue of a Chili’s margarita, on the rocks, with salt. The smell turns from citrus to circus tents

and I swear that I’m about to have an epileptic seizure.

I brace for the big one. I close my eyes and clench my teeth and claw my hands like a crab.

Nothing.

Just minutes earlier I was reaching for my phone when it slid from my fingers causing me to take my eye off the road. It was midnight.

It was Tennessee. I swerved. And there’s nobody on the highway except me, and officer, Tchotchke.

My bare legs were trembling in blue snow. My red high heels scraped the asphalt with each heavy step. My lips cracked as I recited the alphabet from Z to A skipping a few letters,

“K-C-U-F. O-U-Y.”

I admitted to having two cocktails with a friend.

I refused the blood test out of principle.
He was the cobra and I was the honey badger, and I was going to eat my prey and save a little for later. As proof. As bragging rights.

I cried all the way to jail.

“Squat and spread your legs like a chicken,” officer Tchotchke said to me inside the half-empty cell.

I’m in a goddammed freakshow.

Before that night I’d never even smoked a joint, yet there I was standing in one.


This is about to get ugly.

“Excuse me sir, but could you put me in the cell for cool girls?”
Officer Tchotchke wasn’t impressed.

I planned my one phone call carefully,
My brother was two thousand miles away but I was pretty sure he’d been locked up in Tijuana at one point or another,
My sister had a bad tattoo, but she was on a Caribbean cruise ship with her husband,
My husband was out of the question,
I’d tell him about it later,
Something like,
“You won’t believe what I did last night.”

I called grandma.


She called my husband.

He called Grumpy’s Bail Bonds.

I couldn’t even make that shit up.

Grumpy met us around six in the morning,
Officer Tchotchke put me through a series of glamour shots and finally returned my purse,
My husband drove me home.

It was over.

Until it wasn’t.

The court date happened to be on my twenty-seventh birthday.
The state of Tennessee happened to be trying out tougher laws on drivers who drive drunk, and I was a test case.
The judge poetically referred to me as white trash and pointed her finger at a group of twelve middle-school boys who viewed the proceedings with bulging eyes and sniffling snouts,

The only thing missing were the Milk Duds.

I call this the Period of Duende.

My cell was number 867443
and when the door closed behind me
it shook the entire jailhouse. Elvis was right.

My orange jump suit was stamped with human stains and I thought I was going to have a seizure. Again.

Nothing.

I thought I was standing in Mr. Thaemert’s meat locker—the one where my father butchered two steers and a buck every year in order to stock the basement freezer,

I shivered violently,

My slippers were soaking wet and I soon discovered that the toilets in my cell were all backed up so the ten of us slept hovering over fresh sewage.

There were no windows and no bars, 
Just a metal bed inside a metal room
with one big metal door,

And a spider I named Nico. Luckily I had no appetite.

“Hey babe, would you bring me a rock hammer?” was the only conversation I had, outside of the one-liners with my ten new roommates.

Brittany was an accessory to a crime, in other words,

she picked up the phone one day and left a message on a neon green pad of paper for her boyfriend.

That post-it note cost her three months in jail.

“So what was he doing?” I asked, adjusting my black-rimmed glasses.

“Selling guns to some cop.”

Helen was the same Hispanic woman who spent that first night crying in the holding cell, she was sentenced to forty-five days for driving without a license.

They made her wear a red jumpsuit, instead of an orange one, because she was an illegal immigrant, and from the looks of it, the stains on her suit were even worse than the ones on mine.
She’ll probably have a seizure.

“So why were you driving without a license?” I asked.

“I needed milk. For my baby.”

Margaret looked like a Margaret, red hair and freckles, kind of bouncy and she laughed constantly, She really annoyed me, Poor thing had Crohn’s disease and if you know anything about that disease you’ll understand that our toilet situation went from bad to worse.

Because the toilets were in plain view, I held my pee for three days and ended up with a torturous bladder infection.

Margaret wasn’t so lucky.

We weren’t allowed books or paper or television or anything else that didn’t include stale white bread and peanut butter as thick as cement spackle. If I wasn’t going to pee I sure as hell couldn’t eat. Wouldn’t eat. And it cost me another goddamned day in the joint.

I said I was on a hunger strike.

“For what?” they asked.

“Because I’m sleeping in shit,” I said, “and I have the right to a clean cell.”

“We can’t help it,” they said,

and I said, “bullshit,”

and they said, “lights out and shut up,”

and I sang moon river.

The next day, a new girl joined us, she was a gangster, she had tattoos across her face, holes in her eyebrows and chin left over from old piercings, she was a man trapped in a woman’s body, all she could talk about was Civil War history, the military as she remembered it, guns and gun makers,
and the job that was waiting for her in Deadwood.

Calamity Fucking Jane.

By the end of the third day I asked the guards if I could have something to write with.

“Do you happen to have any pencils?”
I said. “Ask officer Tchotchke. He likes me.”

They brought me a box of unsharpened number twos.

—

I left “My Special Weekend” a better person.

Enlightened.

Ready to make a difference in the world.

Proud that I’d survived.

Tough.

But happy to re-join society as a good person and willing to be an advocate for MADD or SADD or AA or Gamblers Anonymous or support groups for those with loved ones in jail.

I became a stellar human being and washed the residue of that weekend right of my record…

That’s a huge fucking lie.

My husband picked me up on Monday morning and handed me flowers,

I threw them out the window,

He handed me a bottle of my perfume and I threw that out of the window too,

I was depressed for months,

maybe a year,

and I never let the house fall below sixty-five degrees.
I cut my hair, I suffered an incorrigible bladder infection, I never spoke to any of the women from my pod ever again, not even Margaret, I wore a slutty dress to my next court date and rolled my eyes when the judge said I needed to dress more professionally, I started smoking pot, I got a job as a bike messenger, and another job as a mime.

Those are lies too, mostly.
I was accustomed to priests buying cigarettes and beer, and I wasn’t surprised the first time Father Mike asked for six Lucky Shamrocks scratch-off tickets.

“Feeling lucky, Father?” I remember asking him.

“Lucky?” he said, crunching and rolling the top of his brown paper sack. “I asked the Sisters if they were interested in a game of poker, but Sister Margene has a gambling problem and Sister Ragizzi is a little too drunk and Sister Marilyn says she’s got the shingles again.

On Friday nights, Father Mike fills his station wagon up with fuel and stops in to see me for a pack of Camels and a twenty-ounce slurpee and I give him Mortal Kombat fighting tips.

“What time you get off tonight?” he always asks. “It’s my last night, Father,” I said.

“Is that right?” he asked. “How about two of those Lucky 7’s and we’ll celebrate?”

We used a couple medium strength Gibson guitar picks I kept in my pocket to scratch off the tickets. Father Mike won a free game.
“So, what’ll it be?” I asked, assuming he’d ask for the Lucky Shamrocks again.

“You pick it,” he said.

The Joker’s Wild and Catch A Big One tickets were cliché to me, overexposed, overplayed, rarely worth the money.

“This one,” I said, rolling out a spool of Montana Millionaire shiny black tickets.

“That’s the one, then,” he said, pointing to the third ticket in the row. “Might just be your lucky night.”

I wasn’t supposed to break up the tickets. But I did it anyway, saving the first two in the cash drawer for someone else.

Montana Millionaire tormented me most of the night. I stuffed it inside my helmet just like Father Mike suggested, and I thought about what it would feel like to win enough money to fix up my bike, maybe buy an espresso machine or a washing machine or a Greyhound ticket to see my brother in South Dakota.

“Why doesn’t my fuckin’ card work?” said a trucker in overalls wearing a “Rebel Forever” hat.
“Every fuckin’ time I come here my fuckin’ card doesn’t work and I’m goddammed fuckin’ tired of it.”

I swiped his credit card and it worked on the first try.
He added a thirty-pack of Milwaukee’s Best, a can of Copenhagen, and bag of Jack Link’s beef jerky to the order.

“This is why you do it,” he said, and I listened like I hadn’t heard it before.
“So people like me have to come in and buy more shit. Fuckin’ pisses me off.”

He sat his purchases on the counter and spent half an hour in the men’s room.
By the time he left, three others were impatiently waiting and I stood behind the counter regretting that I hadn’t quit one day earlier.

Cleaning shit-stained restrooms at a place like The Stop ‘N Go was even less glamorous than being the kid who picked up dead bodies for the morgue—a job I’d had for two years prior to becoming a store clerk and lost, because I dropped the wrong body off at the wrong cemetery.
That’s how I first met Father Mike.
“You got any more of those pork rinds I like, honey?” said Patty, one of the town’s friendliest hookers.

In between shifts she liked caramel corn, pistachios, lemon incense and a bag of barbequed pork rinds.

“I saved one for you,” I said, knowing she’d make a big deal out of it.

“You diiiiiiiiii
iiiiiiiid?” she said. “Aren’t you just the sweetest thing I’ve just about ever laid eyes on?”

Patty and I talked about the new bridge being built on the other side of town, and how we wished paying taxes, like tithing, was optional.

“The faithful ones could pay taxes,” she said, “The rest of us could all just continue our journey to hell.”

Patty showed me a new tattoo on her leg. LULLABY.

She had the dates of when her baby was born and when she died tattooed below it.
After she left, I imagined for a second what it would be like to find Patty after I’d won a million dollars.
Maybe I’d buy her an apartment or at least a Vespa.
She’d always wanted one, pink or yellow, she wasn’t sure.

It was two in the morning by the time I finished cleaning the men’s room. I was pretty sure I’d contracted Hepatitis.

Voices outside kicked around
Trash,
shattered empty bottles on to the pavement.

Voices walked in to the shop, crowding aisles,
trying to divert my attention so the others could steal
condoms,
bottles of schnapps,
Mars Bars and Vienna sausages.

Something was different, this time. They didn’t even try to distract me, just walked around slowly, one of them with a long screw driver in hand, stealing oil and armoral and a three-pack of strawberry Laffy Taffy.

I was tired of being fucked with.
They poured stolen oil into a stolen car, and I thought about Montana Millionaire.
Charlie, my half Pit half Schnauzer met me at the door of my east-side apartment. He’d chewed through two pair of boots and a pack of Bicycle playing cards and ate a bottle of Elmer’s glue.

I pulled Montana Millionaire out of my helmet, sat it on the TV and walked toward a nearby park so Charlie could take care of his business. His pee smelled like Mrs. Holloway’s art class. The only scent missing was the construction paper.

On rare occasions I could see stars through the city lights, and that night they looked like something I could count on, like a doctor’s call, or the way my grandmother smells after she showers and bathes herself again in powder.

After a bath and a bowl of Lucky Charms, I opened a cold beer, still imaging my life as a Montana Millionaire.

*Scratch off three pair of matching numbers and you’re a winner.*

In less than a minute it was over.

I lit a cigarette, turned on the Discovery Channel and watched a show about a pawn shop in Louisiana.
What He Said When I Was Listening

“I’m a detective,”
my grandfather told me when I was seven.

“Most people around this godfersaking town just think I drive around all day, like I’m doing nothing bout nothing, just sitting here in this big white truck. No sir, I don’t just bitch about who stole my tomato plants, I find the sonsabitches who did it.

“Remember that no good pair of white trash sonsabitches that belonged to the Goodall family? I showed them what I thought of them condoms in my cucumber patch, and when they found their litter a blue heeler pups slaughtered in the chicken barn, I’m pretty sure they thought twice the next time they lets those boys out a the house again.

“Reminds me a when Johnny Larsen’s chickens went missing— who was the one that found out that Sylvia Miller was cooking fried chicken ever night for a month?

“Me.

“Holy sonsabitches. I’m a goddammed detective.

“Not like that cocksucker mayor of ours. Gets paid three hunnerd dollars a month to shore enough ride on that goddammed lawn mower as drunk as a goddammed skunk keeping watch on this stupid godfersaking town that elected him.

“Ain’t got a lick a goddammed sense, f’you ask me.

“Sonsabitches politicians.

“I can’t believe that trashy sister a yours got a tattoo that was spose to be an angel but turned out like a goddammed Harley Davidson decal.

“There it is, shore enough on that ankle of hers and she thinks we’re all too dumbed to notice it sitting there as she walks down that aisle.

“Ten years of goddammed bible schools and enough lecturing from me to suit an army a chickenshits but it didn’t do a damned bit a good, does it.

“Walking down the same aisle her grandmother walked sixty-eight years ago in a white dress thinking she’s the goddammed virgin fucking mary?

“She don’t think anybody gonna see it. But I do.
“I’m a goddammed detective.

“After the wedding I may give her a piece of my advice. I know she’s probably expecting a few acres of land so that no good goddammed husband a hers can act like he’s some kind of farmer, or she’s expecting her grandmother’s antique hutch, god bless her soul.

“But I’m gone do her a favor. I’m gone let her think about life for a year or two. Teach her a lesson or two. Teach her bout working for what she wants. If she had enough money for a no good goddammed tattoo than she got enough money to buy her own hutch.

“What I’m gone say is don’t be thinking you’re somebody just cause you got into college.

“You’re just like everybody else around here. Except for that goddammed tattoo. That city gone chew you up and spit you out faster than this lump a chewing tabacca, I swear it.

—I

“I never wanted brothers,

“Course they weren’t my real brothers noways. Lester was five when I was twelve and Lenny is somewhere in the middle.

“I shot Lester’s dog with my twelve-gauge, right between the eyes, one Easter.

“I stopped and pointed that gun at Duggers’ forehead and pretended it was my mother.

“Then I told everybody it was our neighbor Paul Kotzincki, and everybody believed me cause he was a no good goddammed Pollock. But my father found out it was me. Shore enough, found out it was me all along.

“He was a goddammed detective.”
Tripwire
On Translation

We are not allowed to cry for us,
we are an imprudent match
stick,

we held hands when dusk ignited,
its vibrant colors our tongues
and teeth,

through the eye of a barrel,
we saw we,

aluminum skin,
a collection of ships,
notebooks of stinging
floating in glass bullets.
Toxic Soup

Its language
looked betrayed,
it made lists,
prepared
festivals
of fuck ups
for Polynesian
parallelograms,

for pleated
plant-based
skirts,
its fingers
blushed,

it offered kings
maybes
offered queens
typeface
exchanged
ad space for
Extra! Extra! extra
terrestrial leeches,

exchanged pineapples for
pirates, for

pythons, for

one, two, three, foreskin, for
legends on maps, for
religion with schmucks, for
sanitary rooms, for
toxic sludge, for
tent cities, for
sibling rivalries, for
bootlegged freedom, for
bingo.
Louisiana Milky Way

The quiet moon
removes its hush-puppy
crust,
her white
stomach
filled to the brim’s
bone with a
confectionate song,

It sings like
a confetti shard,
ripples like
a peppermint toothpick,
yawns like
a crocodile
smiles,

hush little bayou moon,
its Creole overalls,
its antique
accent,
its cleansing
crescent—
secrets collected
from the
sun;

secretly famished
it waits like
a Buddhist
swear word,
shackled
in cigar smoke,
chained to a Cuban
star,

Quietly it slips
across incurable
glass,
desperate for a
fix.
Human, right

if I suck air
if I swallow oxygen
if I blink to keep my
eyes wet,

if I humanize my cells
if I have human cells
if I sell and suck and blink
and swallow,
I have human rights,
Right.
right?
right,

if I treat international law customary
if I read treaties of customary international law
if I customarily treat international law
with customary treatment
I have human rights,
Right.
right?
right,

if I am not gay
if I show my face
if I wear scarves and act gay
if I wrap scarves around my face
if I wrap about my gayness
if I rap about my scarves
if I act like I’m gay but I’m not gay
if I am gay and scarved
if I am scarved and scarred
I have human rights,
Right.
right?
right,

if I need a gun
if I need a gun for my daughter
if I need a daughter for my gun
if I have the right to have a daughter
if I have the right to have a gun
if I have the right to have a gun and a daughter
if I have the right not to have a daughter
if I have the right not to have a gun
if I have the right not to have a daughter with a gun
I have human rights,
Right.
right?
right,

if I suck the gun and swallow
the gun’s daughter and blink
its eyelids wet,
if I humanize gun’s cells
if I sell human’s rights
if I swallow the sale
through international law
it’s customarily right
for humans,
right?
A Systematic Approach to Making Lemonade

The social reproduction system is abstract, a heterogeneous apparatus of language, and body,

and sp p p peach,

rules bound by signs, inscriptions, tissue of quotations, cells of unitary rules:

System: organized violence
System: a being of subject
System: a philosophy of rights
System: a synchronic slice of struggle
System: cemented families
System: a tissue of codes
System: a struggle of ideology
System: innovative conscience
System: abstract recognition
System: unvoluntary obedience
System: diachronic change
System: dominating consent
System: collective speech
System: a distorted reflection of real things
System: a social flavor
System: an active agent in obedience
System: a performance of doing
System: what’s missing from Frankenstein
System: a denaturalization of Genesis
System: a historical document not of God,

but of citric acid.
The first trimester

An umbrella and a black cat rub
their shiny bodies against my injury,

Where do they come from?
does anyone
care
fully notice?

The city is hot with smell,
I see an empty bowl
under a cement bench,

one stuffed bear,
a ceramic frog,
crackling in the sun,

they
wait next to the bowl.

The cat,
the bowl,
the frog,
the crackling—

I get it.

I pull a piece of grass out
by the root,
three leaves,
one root,
one pull;

A house is breaking
nearby,
rolling on a broken bow,
the fog is easier to swallow
now,

paint on my nails
melts,

undelivers me in
cotton verse.
Behaving As If the God in Life Mattered

Having lived all my life a widower, 
I have no true knowledge of the stealing.

I was a swallow at five-and-a-half, 
peeked through layers of grasses and twigs 
and found an audience in the bees.

Chipped chairs and piano benches my tools, 
in gardens where rabbits left secret prints and 
lime colored snakes hid in cabbage leaves 
and my sister charged an entrance fee.

Bees got a show, 
the snake got a snack, 
and I learned the magic of 
sweetened tea.

Despite earnest technology and science, 
despite scholars and intellectual research, 
what I recognize was what I feel when a word vibrates on my tongue, 
the way it squirms when I swallow, 
the way it grieves when 
it remembers.

I couldn’t smell until I was nearly thirteen. 
The dust, they would say, was the oppressor of my breathing apparatus, 
the scent was sitting there for me, waiting for me, and I smelled layers of decay and life 
and the monastery where I lived.

I was born normal enough.

I believed in an interior life, 
buffered from tension and isolation, rich in climbing trees and listening to rhythm, 
my heart beat in three-four time, 
I discovered strange places familiar to me, 

In my house, in my town, in my school, in pick-up trucks where hands attempted a 
journey toward my thigh, in Sunday School and picnics and county fairs, in locker rooms 
and in front of mirrors where tubes of lipstick stared back at my frightened lips, I was a 
foreigner, but in a tree, I smelled normal. 

But I heard myself apologize.
“Now, as I understand it, convergence means that society today is no longer pretending that there is any difference between things like art and nature, science and religion, between the poetry a man makes out of words and the poetry God makes out of time and space, between the fight one man may fight for dignity in a ring and the fight a whole race of people may fight for dignity on earth.”

—Muhammad Ali, three-time world heavyweight champion, civil rights proponent, and poet