

2010

# The Blue Of

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**THE BLUE OF**

by

**Christine Reilly**

A Proposal Submitted to the Honors Council

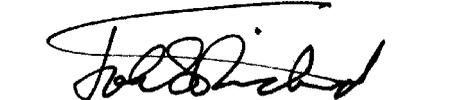
For Honors in English (Creative Writing)

September 6, 2009

Approved by:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Shara McCallum", written over a horizontal line.

Advisor: Shara McCallum

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "John Rickard", written over a horizontal line.

Department Chairperson: John Rickard

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When I first started my thesis, I intended for my finished project to be a compilation of poems that aims to reflect and reveal several repeating themes of our society's collective unconscious, such as the relationship between the physical and spiritual aspects of being and the representation of women's lives, organized religion, adolescence, and mental illness. I proposed writing a chapbook of poetry that reflects an exploration of, and sensitivity to, the human unconscious mind, fears, and desires. Consulting other works of surreal, lyric, and confessional poetry, I sought to personally develop as both a poet and a psychology student. I made a conscious effort to avoid trying to attach a specific "meaning" to each poem. I understand that, in poetry, the reader is never entirely aware of exactly what the poet is trying to convey. All the reader knows is what he or she sees in a given poem and how he or she responds to that poem. However, through working on my thesis I discovered that, while meaning may not be intentional in the drafting process, developing what the poem meant to me was central to the process of revision. Furthermore, I realized that I unconsciously returned to specific themes across various poems, something that was not apparent to me until I re-read my entire collection.

To discuss some of the particular themes I have become aware that I return to, I will refer to several of the poems that appear in the chapbook. In many of my poems, I include nameless characters that most readers can relate to: the mother, the baby, the sister, the grandmother, the grandfather, etc. I also explore the roles several characters as archetypes tend to occupy in my work. When I started writing my poems, I was not aware of the purpose each character would serve, but as I edited and reflected on my

work I realized that the presence of an archetypal person helps make the poem accessible to a reader.

Perhaps the best example of my application of this technique is “Blackberry Lips”. In this poem, I explore feelings for a sister who does not actually exist in my life. Despite this fact, I think the sympathy for the speaker's sister I evoke in this poem – through the use of line repetition, even pacing and sorrowful language – makes this sister more of a real person than quite possibly anybody else I have written about in my chapbook (many of whom are based on real people). The lines, “My sister,/didn't know what was possible or impossible/to digest, tried to swallow the universe,/but had to settle for kissing clouds,/open-mouthed, instead” subvert the archetypal role of an older sister. The “big sister” is one who demands protection from her younger sister. The younger sister, who is the speaker of the poem, has a plethora of complex feelings toward her older sister, mostly pity for her. She recognizes that in spite of her older sister's defiant nature, she ultimately fails in whatever she intends to prove or do in her life.

Though my work is not linear or narrative in a traditional sense, two characters, named Stephen and Judith, recur. When these characters reappear in different poems, I believe each poem is strengthened because the presence of each character represents finite human perspectives that the reader can apprehend. Since these characters are not fully developed nor granted particular identities that are fully accessible to the reader, their dimensions are largely symbolic. For instance, in one poem, Judith adopts the persona of a ghost who speaks in quotes from the Old Testament; in another, she is a single, celibate English teacher. Regardless of her specific identity, Judith carries the

same qualities throughout my writing: she is lonely, she is a woman, she is a sexual being, and the narrator is terrified to be associated with her. By loosely basing her character on certain universal human experiences – fear of death, persistent feelings of loneliness, and a desire for sex – I hoped for readers to be emotionally affected by Judith. My other character, Stephen, serves the purpose of being both a lover and an alter-ego for the narrator. His presence holds multiple meanings within my work, but mostly I utilize him as a cathartic tool both for myself as the poet and for the reader. For example, I allow his character to offer answers to questions about humanity, love, and loss, which allow for some emotional release within the poem.

In “What Makes Me Anxious”, Stephen starts out as the speaker of the poem's naïve young lover, who refuses to believe that she is dying because “young people don't die”. Within a few lines, Stephen transforms into a concept: more specifically, he is god. I employ this tactic so Stephen can occupy figurative and literal spaces. I write, “And the new name for god was Stephen. And Stephen wouldn't start wars or seduce suicide bombers this time,” as a way to show my raw, optimistic, and complicated opinions about the world's injustices and what I want god, despite my disbelief in him, to mean to me. I want god to be as innocent, well-meaning, and real as the human teenage boy who is the speaker's lover. Stephen – as concept and figure – is both. In another poem, “The Ghost in the Sorority House WebMDs and Diagnoses Me,” Stephen is just as ignorant about life decisions and as naïve as I sometimes feel I am -- this is seen when I write “Stephen...my boyfriend attends university, aspiring to get his MR degree, to become a kept man”. I hope to accomplish within this poem the sense of unity that connects young souls who

often feel lost and misguided at points in their lives.

I have noticed that I often place my characters in unrealistic, surreal scenarios to balance out the dramatic emotions they convey. My utilization of the surreal reflects my interest in it as a texturizing, stylistic feature of the poem rather than as a philosophy. The surreal is not the driving force behind my poems, which would involve a desire to unlock the psychic force of the poem. Rather, I look at the surreal as a protective force, for the reader the poet, against the brutal nature of ugly real life situations. The surreal mode embeds a poem's meaning in images that seem absurd, initially, but begin to make a sort of sense within the world of the poem. For example, in "Sammy Comes In" I write, "So I say to Sammy, *why do you have to bring up the Holocaust/at a time like this? Can't you see that I'm happy.* And Sammy tells me/I haven't been eating. And Sammy tells me that I keep compartmentalizing/my grief. So I hide him in my little box of drugs. And Sammy only comes/when I tell him to. Sammy comes in and he is in my body. It tastes like/sugar and I am hungover. And I can't see my knees, for I am too fat./And my knees look like toothpicks. I cross them four times. *Damn/skinny girl,* my cat says. I am on drugs and I'm paranoid. I'm fucked". I use simple language and completely bizarre imagery in order to convey raw and confusing emotions: being in love, being a slave to the unpredictability of life, feeling oppressed by another or by a school of thought. My use of the surrealist mode within my poems reflects my attempt to achieve the goal of making my poem's candor and honest emotion shine through, in a realm of dramatic and deliberate actions and ridiculous scenarios. I am not exaggerating when I say that I feel the most comfortable writing about a completely absurd scenario; I feel like surreal

images best capture the gritty subjects of many of my poems. In other words, I think that the surreal emphasizes the psychological value of each poem.

I also think that poetry provides an excellent outlet for making art out of subjects and underlying emotions that are not easily explained prosaically. For example, for myself I cannot view death in a rational sense, but by broaching death again and again in different ways in my poems, I am allowed to make an intuitive sense of the subject. In my poem “Grandpa, Go to Sleep”, a poem that is purely autobiographical, I attempt to make a poetic kind of sense of not only my grandfather's death, but my grandfather's life. I did not understand why his Alzheimer's disease affected him in the ironic way it did – only his short-term memory disappeared; he was still able to recall every horrifying detail of his Holocaust survival story. Because of this sad irony, I tried to seek out the positive in his situation. Otherwise, I could not bear emotionally to think of it. When I write, “I consider myself lucky to share his blood,/to continue our family after the Nazis planned to exterminate us,/to hear a guttural nightmare pouring out of his pillow and whispered into my diary”, I utilize the poem as a means of capturing my complicated feelings – fear, sadness, and love – about such abstract and universal injustices. Likewise, I use my poem “Out of Sethe's Back” as a means of expressing another thoroughly abstract and universal topic: not death but birth. In this poem, I do not write frantically with a mission but, rather, attempt to paint a picture of a messy and thoroughly natural life process. In this scenario, I do not search for a prescribed understanding of birth but seek to capture its pure aesthetic beauty. I compare birth to a symphony of cicadas and describe the female body delicately as I pray for the mother's and child's health and life.

I have always been drawn to the philosophy that reading and writing poetry can be therapeutic or a coping mechanism for both the writer and reader. Like other forms of art, the best poetry is often seen as one that elicits an emotional response. I hope that the poems that comprise my chapbook reflect the richness I've gained from utilizing psychological themes and literary craft in order to speak directly to the reader about an idea or emotion. In the end, my hope is that the psychological value of my work is based on its ability to utilize specific literary techniques and engage universal spaces and themes.

*Half Blue Half Jew*

The boys yell, *Hey there, little bumblebee-haired blue-eyed goy.*  
The boys yell, *Hey there, little bumblebee-haired blue-eyed goy.*  
The boys sting, *clean yourself in the mikva, then you'll get a nice Jewish boy.*

I say, *I'm not different, all our mamas make us gefilte fish Friday night.*  
I say, *I'm not different, all our mamas make us gefilte fish Friday night.*  
They sting right back: *Cover yourself, you whore, stop giving us a free sight.*

The boys throw a rock at my stomach, payment for the skin show.  
The boys throw a rock at my stomach, payment for the skin show.  
My skin turns eggplant like the tattoo from Auschwitz on my grandpa's left elbow.

The principal says *Reilly* like it's some sort of curse.  
The principal says *Reilly* like it's some sort of curse.  
He barks, *shiksa you don't belong here, leave this town for one with a church.*

My teachers say, *Catholic girl, stop being a dreamer.*  
My teachers say, *Jewish girl, stop being a dreamer.*  
*You can't be half and half like a coffee creamer.*

The boys will hurt me and laugh if I call myself a Jew.  
The boys will hurt me and laugh if I call myself a Jew.  
Half blue, half blue — my identity ripped, all the way through.

*Infection*

Shots of cortisone

to clear the wound

take out the old stitch

hypoallergenic stitch

a gelatinous spiderbite

opium

i worry for more than body

i have duct tape

scotch tape

wayward cut

my scars are timestamps

my body rejects

steady slow flicker

nothing but a hiss at first

slow burn

chased with smelling salts

they still have to open

put in the new stitch

sinking into me

god i'd do anything for drugs

nutmeg

my psyche, burnished

masking tape

i am peeled, hollow

reptiles shed scars

to pain, to tolerance

nothing but itself

a stove's blue gas light

unexpected shock of light

*The Blue of*

I nail glass siding on the backs  
of my thighs and carry see-through suitcases full  
of milky sky. Everything I own

is a window – bay, bow, casement  
and burning hopper. I wanted to get some damn  
ventilation around here, to sucker punch any intruder

that climbed in on a ladder with anything  
but the best of intentions. To the one who told me my body was like  
an island – I am not sorry.  
My body is an everywhere

reflection. Clear. A window.

*Sky Bloodclot*

The day the sky decided to slaughter itself  
in half and render itself useless, we were  
practicing Double-Dutch in my driveway,  
mother and daughter and door-handle.  
Clouds bled with rain from the South of France:  
puddles in the soupy air collided  
with our bodies. We were soaked,  
and still the cadence  
of my feet on sidewalk continued.

The starless sky felt like a cotton swab.  
The sky receded at four,  
as though to admonish us,  
*your day better be over just about now!*  
We ran water. I hid a pillow of yeast  
in my mother's bed. We nestled together.  
In spite of the outdoor apocalypse  
we languished in the house heat,  
excited for moon-warmth.  
I was safe with my mother,  
and the end did not matter.

*Grandpa, Go to Sleep*

My grandfather was the last person I've known  
to still carry a handkerchief. When he died,  
I placed it in my pocket.

Alzheimer's blessed and cursed him  
so that he was only able to forget five minutes ago,  
not how to kiss his wife on the forehead, not the middle  
names of his grandchildren, not how to plant vegetables  
and still not Auschwitz, not Buchenwald.

I consider myself lucky to share his blood,  
to continue our family after the Nazis,  
to have heard his guttural nightmare, poured out of his pillow, whispered.  
My grandmother is touching the fabric, making  
a quilt of my grandfather's life, telling me his story.

*Wake Up Grandma*

Uncollapse, unstitch, carry me in your papoose.  
I only learned how to write after sleeping  
with your quilts, nested inside layers and afternoons.  
I realize there is a way to make art out of fear.  
Consider finding the perfect combination of words or  
thread formations soft enough to completely  
dissolve every child, job, husband we've carried as mothers, as females  
since being born. Consider finishing a quilt or a poem,  
flushed, and ecstatic yet mollified, this thrush  
digging at something whole, something splendiferous,  
time-tossed and tempting. You tell me,  
*I am art, spread across generations like ladyslippers.*

*Out of Sethe's Back*

*I. The Tree*

Her back furrowed and scarred into a constellation resembling  
a tree. She gave life while her skin died. She lay  
entangled in bedsheets, a white orchard.

*II. The Root*

When she was dead tired from her whipping she took off her clothes.  
I barely knew her; we were by the side  
of the road and in this moment  
I saw her root-like scars protruding like wings. Her body swathed  
in white bedsheets, five petals  
from the earth. Her skin like transparent cicada wings.  
I salted her back with my tears and prayed  
for one more ring of life.

*III. The Branch*

The branch protects all those  
who dwell under it, reach out  
to nourish the apples that lie between the bedsheets.  
The weeping willow weeps for two.

*IV. The Fruit*

Fermented grapes in her mouth, blood between the white sheets.  
When the baby finally arrived, against  
the sun-cracked window, light fluttered in.  
Her bones and breasts were full, the baby cried like  
a cicada. The baby began to root.

*My Friend Stephen Turned Himself Into This Title*

1.

Knock-knock, no one's there, everyone's sense  
of self has been colonized and contaminated by pop music.  
There is nothing left to do but write myself into a new  
identity. I write, *I chew ice. I am part Cherokee*  
*Indian. I am upside-down.* I jump out of the page, ready

to reveal my new self to the world: *Here I is!*, my best  
Buckwheat impression. You are Stephen, the teenage boy  
hiding under my bed. You are the only one left who is literate.  
I should have turned myself into a billboard for Corona  
but then again I like to retain an air of subtlety.  
Every person I know is an object. The feminists have a field day  
with this. When they look at me they don't know what to do –  
they donate me to the fox-faced high school English teacher,  
Miss Lonely. Miss Lonely is a pseudonym: her real name is  
Judith. Judith would have spent three class periods searching  
for meaning behind me but she has already turned herself  
into a can of beets. Deciphering poetry is not normally

the forte of a can of beets. Judith turned herself into a can  
of beets because she has not gotten laid in a long time.  
The community rallies, *Think of the children!* The children  
have mostly turned themselves into knock-knock jokes and  
shalach manos baskets. We live in a largely Orthodox Jewish  
community. Shalach manos baskets are not interested in English  
class or poetry. They forget most of their English somewhere  
between your ribcage and sandy-skinned foot. Frankly, I'm not surprised.  
Stephen, when we were people, your presence would also make me forget my – damn.

My brothers are now Mexican jumping beans. My father is  
a Zamboni. My mother turned herself into your bottom dollar. She  
lives in Vegas now. We got evicted from our house. I live on paper now,  
prime real estate for poetry. A boy I didn't know once  
told me that he used to look over my shoulder and read my poetry in English class.

2.

I get tired of being a poem. I know a lot about psychology. I turned  
myself into every personality disorder in the DSM.  
The morbidity backfired and I got stuck  
with only hypochondria. I turned myself into cognitive dissonance and had  
to change half of my opinions. Most of them were about you. I changed

myself again, right away, into the Whitney Museum. I didn't want any obsolete ideas about who I was, what I represented, to whom I belonged. People saw the pieces inside me and forgot about most of them. I wasn't used to being an exhibitionist. I wasn't used to being attractive. I didn't know what to do with the donations. I asked my friend Charity about them; she said, *refurbish, renovate*. I stayed up all night in myself after everything else had closed, holding a flashlight and looking for things to make better. I took the elevator up then down then found some things I wasn't supposed to find:

I found postmodernism, I found shit-eating grins, I found my grandpa's parking spot in Pennsylvania and then I found love in a deep, dark corner. I lost my clothes. I crawled out the window.

3.

When I was human, I had to walk four miles to English class to see my psychologist. She told me I had an obsession with *stealing intimacies*. My psychologist turned herself into Unhealth. I see her a lot more often now. I only love people between four and five a.m. All of the people I was once in love with turned themselves into science projects. I studied them tempestuously. I never knew you could make textiles from banana skins!

Everyone in love went through a phase where they turned themselves into pots and covers. I flew to Poland and everything turned black and white. Judith was there! We had a two-night stand. Both times I thought it was the last. The Eastern European waiters asked us, *Still or sparkling water?* She said *still*, I said *six-dollar champagne*. I knew it wasn't going to work. I turned myself into the smoke that Bill Clinton (allegedly) didn't inhale. She turned herself into a cigar. It was none of my business. My mother wrote me a letter from Vegas, telling me to turn myself into Equilibrium. She said, *the world will be fine without you for a few hours*. I tried but didn't feel like myself. Then I realized I couldn't read the letter; you were the only one in the world left who is literate. We went to see the three-euro opera in Vienna, tying scarves onto the balcony to reserve standing-room places. I lost

my scarf. It was around your neck. You said, *don't ever feel bad for thinking anything because you can't help thinking it*. The trouble was, everything I thought ended up on the page. And every time I cried my tears got the paper wet. And pretty soon no one was able to read me at all.

So I turned into a novelty T-shirt, and all it said was *Nobody's ugly after two a.m.* Those were the only words left. God turned into a religious compromise: *we'll raise her Catholic so we won't have to pay for her Bat Mitzvah.* I went to the ice-skating rink to visit my father. He would have told me, *communication is dead.* I watched him clean the ice for hours, slowly meditatively. I went back to the Whitney Museum to board up all the windows. You turned into the sun that crept in before me, warming the bed.

*Sammy Comes In*

Sammy comes in and he cries maple syrup. He is pulp, such a sap, juices running down trees, seeds and pits, mealy fruit in the supermarket, a used band-aid. He is my brother's best friend. And my knees are still there and the bees are all virgins, and flowers have shriveled before they can blossom.

Sammy comes in and pours a glass of water. The tap had gone dry years before. Instead of water, we live and die by coffee and cigarettes. Sammy hands me a glass of thick, fresh water. *Drink*, he tells me. The water tastes like soap that protects me from using forbidden primal words. The water is a kneepad; curse my mouth.

Sammy comes in on a double-decker bus this time. *The world is my oyster*, he tells my family. We have been shucking oysters all day with our feet. My toenails have all turned into pearls. And my toes are twenty-one and they are virgins. And the extra toe smiles at Sammy.

Sammy comes in and Shock follows!  
There is a huge rumble. The Jets and the Shocks and the Histories, Sciences and Faiths. The leader of the Faiths has been knifed. She dances her way up to heaven. Heaven is a museum in Paris. Faith is a boyish-looking stripper.

Sammy comes in and I've hit Puberty, a clean swift cut across the face. I have been growing up quite well, thank you. My brother takes me to the opera, the ballet. My brother takes me for Mexican food. And I say *Holy Guacamole*. And Sammy says *remember the Holocaust*.

So I say to Sammy, *why do you have to bring up the Holocaust at a time like this? Can't you see that I'm happy*. And Sammy tells me I haven't been eating. And Sammy tells me that I keep compartmentalizing my grief. So I hide him in my little box of drugs. And Sammy only comes

when I tell him to. Sammy comes in and he is in my body. He tastes like sugar and I am hungover. And I can't see my knees, for I am too fat. And my knees look like toothpicks. I cross them four times. *Damn skinny girl*, my cat says. I am on drugs and I'm paranoid. I'm fucked.

The phone rings: my father.

*I am with my two brothers, don't worry*, he tells me. *We made tacos and are eating them. We are surfing on the sand*. And I tell him, *I thought one of your brothers is History*. He says, *no. The rumble was canceled*. War is over. Happy Christmas. And Merry Chanukkah, too.

Sammy comes in and he is holding a quilt. He is going to take me out of my misery. Sammy is my best friend. And I comply until I see a little stitch on the quilt. And it is my Grandma's quilt. And I'm crying. *Sammy, you are my best friend.*

Sammy comes in and I am Healthy again. So Sammy says, *Hi Healthy!* And we laugh and we laugh. And I make us a big bubbling pot of Mexican jumping beans. And we eat until we start jumping. And we jump all the way to the sky.

Sammy comes in and I ask him to stay, for once. *Look at my legs, my knees.* They have hatch marks running up and down. I burn. I sear. And Sammy tells me it's all in my head. I look down, and my legs are peach and he isn't falling

for my vulnerability. Sammy comes in through the window in my back. I hide a marble in my mouth. Cinco de Mayo came early this year. So did Sammy. It's May first. We are dancing around the maypole. And then someone comes

in and crashes into the Maypole. And soot is flying everywhere. And the opera my brother takes me to omits the words "buried alive" because that would be insensitive. And when we go outside, we see hands and knees poking out of the ground.

And one of the hands is my mother's. And I hold her hand. And it is September thirteenth. Sammy comes in and rides over me with a tricycle. It tickles so hard I can't laugh. Laugh or breathe. The ground feels like quicksand. A plane flies by

and Faith is inside. And Faith exclaims, "Where is my maypole? I was going to dance for you on it." I am scared of planes and trains. And Sammy comes in and gives me a lift on his badass tricycle.

Sammy comes over and he is hurting my heart. I spit out the marble. *For you, I say. Eat.* My heart is crushed. He picks me up by the knees. There are flowers. There is death. There are bees.

*Six Ways of Looking in the Mirror*

**I.** To my reflection: You're twenty-one, god bless you.

**II.** Still the boy bit my ear and infected

every bit of me. I only know because  
I saw his mouth, my face, backwards in a hand mirror.

The mirror cracked and turned to sand.  
A hot shiver then burst of cold excited my blood

pressure and revved up my immune system.  
I said nothing as I fingered the cigarette burn on my thigh,

invisible. I've never smoked, see; but the boy  
imagined that I did. I told him he was an

animal and he took it as a compliment –  
his thighs burning with lactic acid,

his mouth telling me  
to make a pride/shame list. Okay.

One – I sleep too much. Two – I think risk  
behavior is romantic, three – I like things

that are bad for me. Four – I can't think  
of a fourth. *And pride?* he asked me,

peeling from his lips. My pride list is the same as my  
shame list. All of the above –

**III.** I am the emotionally masochistic cricket.  
I give myself another execution. I try to punish

myself hundreds of times but my hungry  
head grows in soil, your mouth fogging up

my window, my mouth on your

**IV.** For the first time I meet the ghost in the sorority house.

She doesn't look like a ghost to me; she is fox-faced

with ugly spores on her hands. I think

she's been washing dishes for far too long. Her name is Judith, she always appears at the edge of my window

wearing a taut-to-bursting dress. I offer her an orange and she always declines. Judith is a finicky

eater. She smells clean, like a boy, says her pelvis always hurts, that my mattress feels like unleavened

bread. I only let her sleep with me because she looks lonely and she visits me as brief as daylight

during the winter solstice. Once she lied and told me her name was Elijah. Usually she ends up crying until her eyesockets

glisten like edges of sea glass. Then she sublimates, and I breathe a sigh of relief. Then I hear only her voice confess,

*Unclean one, where are we going?*

**V.** I have a one-second dream only to learn that my left elbow is the “evil” body part.

**VI.** *Is this a Question?*

I should have known that my biggest vice would be other people, practicing mouth to mouth

to elbow to foot to breast to mouth. I painted the Fall of Lucifer in different mediums – air, then earth, then fire.

I got sent to Water instead of Hell. Where the hell is that? *Oh*, I deduced. *God wants me to drown.* You were the type

of friend who separated all of his food portions. You didn't like the idea of my body: toes cracking, legs lifting, too

many parts. Your original answer was, *because I knew you would say yes*,

neutral vowels and garbled pieces of filler. You were

the executioner, safe cricket-keeper. And you hated me  
and kissed me every time you wanted to tell me so. Gather your  
indiscernable thoughts! I can see your bare collarbones  
below the blanket. And so I had to answer my own question.  
*Is this an answer?*

*Solfège*

Something so tender  
about thirteen.  
Choir teacher put our voices  
in boxes: *Alto. Soprano.*  
From there, we set off: determined, divisible,  
invisible, god forbid individual,  
fated for the rest of our lives  
to sing either harmony or melody.  
Even at the time it was clear:  
altos were second-tier.  
Boys had it worse; pity the boys,  
with voices so translucent, voices whole  
before breaking. I smelled frustration  
festering in string instruments. Extensions  
of wooden arms and legs – voices didn't grow  
hair or break-out unless it was *DO RE MI FA.*  
When each note erupted, the boys' hormones  
screamed in seven keys, none of them right.  
No permanence to the pre-pubescent voice,  
breathy and moist. (Things only flow in).  
And who got the solo?  
(but who wants to sing the solo?  
To stand out? I'd rather die).  
My voice was a vortex.  
Good girls didn't have raspy voices,  
coiled and blotchy like my rebellious skin.  
(I wished I'd chosen violin).  
Oh thirteen, how I'd do nothing to go back  
to the age where adults never asked me once  
to sing the melody and were scared to look me  
below the eye.

*Blackberry lips*

My sister with the Lady Godiva hair, long and lean  
like a milkweed seed, played her jazz records  
whenever there was rain because she couldn't  
tell the difference between the two. My sister,  
mouth breather with oven-warm hands,  
liked to sing songs in a key that hadn't been invented yet.  
My sister, the smoker with big hips and blackberry lips,  
made a promise to our mother at the age of five  
she could stop chewing her split ends,  
the first of many broken promises in her life.  
My sister with the oven-warm hands, who whistles  
through her teeth, was christened a *smartass*  
by boys down the street because she let words  
slip from her lips like ribbons of water. The other parents said  
*put a muzzle on that one*. My sister,  
who said the word *fuck* like *sunshine*. My sister  
with oiled tongue, who gave head to bread, chocolates  
and sweet cashews, vomited them up as a sacrifice.  
My sister, who was breastfed for too long,  
thought every stranger and boy down the street  
was the milkman and trusted too much. My sister,  
who didn't know what was possible or impossible  
to digest, who tried to swallow the universe  
but had to settle for kissing clouds,  
open-mouthed, instead.

*The Ghost in the Sorority House WebMDs and Diagnoses Me*

*I am sorry but you are garbage-nosed and you are addicted to boys.* She says this with a sideglance, her pupils dilated like a cocaine-fueled, vertigo-suffering elementary school teacher. I run to the beach and swaddle myself in a clamshell. Rock a bye baby, cradle and all. I am swallowed.

So I have done some research on my disease. I can only smell through my armpits; my dirty milk carton nose is useless. And my addiction to boys may have even inhibited my pursuit in settling into a monogamous relationship.

I hunt geese and mice.  
I am looking for a monogamoose relationship. I wear the antlers from the dead moose I mutilated.

I always mix up the words  
observatory and conservatory. Observatory is where you go to watch warm stars in their houndstooth winter coats, bright like honeysuckled snow. Each star burns like a kiss on the forehead.

Conservatory is where you go to swallow music notes and then wonder if everyone else in the room is happy. What is your favorite music note? Mine is *ti*, the flushed sound my body makes on nights when I come home alone and the alcohol has finished processing through my arms.

So I met someone; that is what you're supposed to say, right? Stephen knows how to kiss me. He rubs my nose against his. My boyfriend attends university, aspiring to get his MR degree, to become a kept man. University is for sleeping,

attending parties, listening to the *you do what you love and it will all work out* monologue, the same song and dance softshoe slap of a professor who cheats at solitaire. Publish, or perish, and if you choose a major that isn't sensible, you can always marry rich! I'm a reverse

psychology major. My boyfriend and I take a sabbatical to the lost colony of Roanoke. I publish one sentence.

*My throat is a drain connecting my words to the rest  
of my body, a telescope.* There are some places  
I go just so I can excuse myself

and go to the bathroom. There are some places I go  
so I can leave early. I like to draw these places on my arms.  
They are the saddest places in the world, existing like  
stray sheaves of corn. These places do not have smells.  
*Smell is the strongest memory stimulant,* says the Ghost

in the sorority house. She snorts all of her drugs because  
she loves the smell of them: like tongues in cheeks, like  
gasoline, like the coquettish stars. They remind her  
of the beach in winter, snow on sand, reflecting  
in the sky, turning the snow on the ground erasermate pink.

Ghosts can get sunburns too. My Ghost has a bun  
in the oven, a sweet potato. She is making a family. That  
is what we are all supposed to do. The Ghost congratulates  
me on finding a boyfriend. I feel her stomach and the baby  
sings scales to me, *la ti do*. Her nasal passages are melting.

Stephen and I have computers and they talk  
to each other. Today he asked me if I wanted to try  
a new form of technological intimacy. He said, *maybe*  
*I'll give you a call sometime*, and as the cord to my laptop  
fell out I felt a lightning bolt strike through my pants.

I rock myself to sleep  
in my seashell cradle. I can hear and smell the ocean,  
but I cannot see it. I am on an island and I am on  
sabbatical. I am supposed to be having fun but  
it smells like garbage everywhere.  
Stephen bites my nose, licks my disease.

*What Makes Me Anxious:*

the sound of sneezing, the fact that the heart is slightly inclined to the right. I'm left-handed. I have just a few hours to live. Stephen has a crush on me and he thinks I'm joking. *Come on a date with me*, he keeps saying. *Young people don't die*. I took a life expectancy test and was told I'm going to die young because I sleep ten hours

a night and keep my thermostat high. That was in the midst of my eighth-life crisis. I decided to change, and re-spelt my name with only consonants. It wasn't enough. The worst kind of hangover is love

hangover. I spoke to Death before coming back once. She told me she wanted a new name for god. And the new name for god was Stephen. And Stephen wouldn't start wars or seduce suicide bombers this time. I prayed in French once to Stephen, calling him Soleil.

“Sanctuary!” is what people call when they can't decide between 911 and 411. If Stephen had asked me on a date to Sanctuary, maybe I would have said yes. Instead he asked me to the docks, where teenagers go to try and not conceive children. I wasn't popular because my father is a narwhal. I read books and stayed home. I used to have dreams about reading books that didn't exist. I loved those dreams until I woke up and realized the books didn't exist. I used to spy on the teenagers fornicating on the docks and slip them dental dams. No one knew what a dental dam was. Some animals came around and built McMansions out of them.

Stephen and I are on the docks and a college student is asking us to slapbag a box of Franzia. He calls it, *the body and blood of Christ*. I have one hour to live. Carpenter ants live on the moon now. They're building a chain of hotels just for smokers. The hotels are all towers, standing like fathers. A cloud of blue dust-smoke perpetually lingers above the hotel chains. The ants were tired of ethnic jokes from the other insects so they resettled. They have developed their own dialect. It sounds like a combination of earth ants and green rocks. One hotel is now the Universe Trade Center. There is no need for a World Trade Center. There is no need for even a World.

Stars understand heavy labor. They are exploding, imploding, their way through the cosmos. I know that the stars are definitely made of gasoline but I can't tell you the reason. I was sworn to secrecy. My father bought stock in Exxon-Mobil. That was the day the Valdez ruptured. Tides cursed the moon as inky soup drowned all sea-creatures. The tides and the moon were never the same again. They were both females, screaming, "Sanctuary! Sanctuary!"

You know when they say *too soon, too soon* – when is that moment where it's okay to make a joke? I used to write joke poems about Hiroshima and the Holocaust. Hitler's gas bills were very high. The moon got rich off him and hates to talk about it. She built a subterranean Holocaust memorial. Stephen and I had our first kiss in the human hair exhibit.

My father could never handle his money. Narwhals aren't necessarily known for managing money. I know that's a stereotype, but it's true! Ocelots are better. My cousin by marriage is an ocelot. She got married in the other universe, the one we traded oil with, where marriage for everyone was legal. I asked my parents for permission to marry a cardinal. "What kind of cardinal? Bird or religious figure?" they asked, because the church is still the damn same as it used to be. A cardinal, the type that can't marry, sang at my confirmation. He told me to pick a new name because my other two names weren't Christian enough. My first name is Christine. I don't know what the Jesus he was talking about. He told me to begin again. I was very alarmed. The cardinal liked little boys. He never touched them, but he asked one in confessional, "Do you masturbate, son?" The child became an atheist. That child was my father. He saw me flying out of the World Trade Center. Thank god I'm a girl. Thank god I'm half-narwhal.

-Chrstn Rll(y)

*Fever*

Who knew just thinking the words *quarantined, me and you* could make me feel this way: A frowsy philharmonic, a hothouse of plucking hooked harps, of coughing and overheating wango-tango. The diseases with the most beautiful names are scarlet fever, rheumatoid arthritis and, behold, pneumonia. Scarlatti plays the harpsichord, a chorus of chest pain and croup cough, an opera of communicable disease. Contact, baby, contact. Who knows where this love-rash actually comes from. We bathe, igniting these closed quarters, We do not notice.

*The Cry*

I hold everything in one of two ways: like a baby  
or loaf of bread. Holding your hand felt like the latter,  
soft gooseflesh, and I was tough yes, yes so rough  
with you, silky sweat sinking and melting  
into the half-trapezoid laugh lines on your palms. You taught

me to think only in sepia. Listening to cells  
burn off my tongue, I think of that time I said  
“never mind”. I break dishes with too much force, fall  
in love with forks and knives too soon, too soon.

You threatened to pull out all your teeth,  
coins in a rusty slotbucket. Pulling teeth is just  
like carving into a fence, I promised – lasting forever  
and three days. Tattoos and fences decay and disintegrate but  
teeth, yes teeth, fossilize – just look:  
dinosaur bones, milkysoft Egyptian babyteeth.

I asked the dentist to drill a hole in every  
tooth to absorb whatever went into my mouth –  
you, tooth-breaking rye bread, lies, salt.

Washing dishes, stitches in my side,  
splinter in my palm, I wait to knead bread.  
I hear a far-off cry.

*Killer Heals*

And your favorite word, “defenestration” was exactly  
how you wanted to die.

For one minute the sun-freckled leaves  
on the floor would be replaced by thousands upon thousands  
of umbrella tips, peeking out of the ground like

summer peacocks,  
shimmying their tails.

Windows can be swayed open any time of year,  
not just in the heart of autumn. Be it onto  
watered or sun-scorched ground, your suicide clasped onto its own glamour.

The idea of healing bothered you most, the idea  
that your body would once again continue to rebel  
against your notions of what you always  
dreamed of – to be beautiful, to be thin, to be thrown from  
an eighth-story window in killer heels.

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