

FIELD EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

FIELD EDUCATION

by Jennifer Graves

Field Education is a collection of poems that chronicles my literal and imaginative journey through young adulthood, and through my evolution as a poet. These poems explore issues and themes as diverse as environmental justice, race, class, gender, mental health, heterosexual romance (mostly the lack of romance), critiques of the American dream, and patriarchal Christianity. Many of these poems are simultaneously sad and funny or employ irony in order to make serious subjects approachable and strong institutions or normative assumptions questionable.

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INTRODUCTION

Field education is the applied portion of learning in professional education programs. Rather than simply putting theory into practice, the book-smart novice goes into the field to learn that the relationship between theory and practice must be creatively reciprocal if the theory is to have any relevance at all, because life is nothing like the book. My title poem, “Field Education,” begins as a romantic, imagistic nature poem. However, by the end of the poem, the “field” is the guilty harbinger of a chaotic and violent awakening. The poem’s speaker takes the reader from the serene image of grass that has been “matted down where deer have slept” to the discovery of her mad ancestors, and comes away with pokes in the eye, having been taught, the hard way, to pay attention. *Field Education* is a coming of age collection in which I try making sense of the depth and complexity of the relationships between social structures, interpersonal relationships, and individual subjectivities. All the while I form my own energetically critical responses to injustice while simultaneously confessing participation in both the beauty and violence of things. Although I consider these poems a sort of documentation of my own “field education,” the line between fact and fiction in this collection is sometimes fuzzy, as is often the case in poetry.

Of the critical theory to which I have been exposed so far, as a poet, I identify most with Charles Simic in his essay “Negative Capability and Its Children.” In my own experiments with combining book learning and life learning, I have learned to make room for the unknown and the unexpected, therefore privileging experiential knowledge over theory much of the time, allowing for a kind of flexibility in which experience informs theory at least as much as theory explains experience. In addition to my ideological identification with Simic, my status as a poetry novice

has meant that, stylistically, I have honored the “empiricism of imagination” over any kind of literary tradition (Simic 344). As I experiment with a number of different forms, I am often uncertain of what I am doing. While I do strive to build my knowledge and skills with life and poetry, I am thankful to Simic for honoring the state of never fully knowing, which I think is central to the human condition. Simic says that the poet and the poem are “in the midst, a kind of magnet for complex historical, literary and psychological forces, as well as a way of maintaining oneself in the face of that multiplicity” (343). As a poet, and as a human being, I am in a constantly changing state of using what little I know to experiment with the rest. In a poetry tradition that celebrates experimentation, which is, according to Simic, “based on experience rather than on theory or authority,” I have discovered, there is room for beginners (344). After I offered my advisor some of my earliest poems, those I had written in my early twenties, without academic training in poetry, I was delightedly surprised to receive the feedback that some of the work I had done, without knowing much about poetry at all, could be considered good poetry.

I must admit that I came to poetic experimentation honestly by two routes. First, even though I had never studied poetry academically, I had been reading the experimental work of old friends of mine, Donna de la Perriere and Joseph Lease, for several years, often not knowing what exactly I was reading, and yet feeling a deep resonance with their work, perhaps especially with the aspects of it that were shrouded. The aspect of understanding that is partial is for me a source of intrigue and a place for imagination, play, and in some cases political leverage. Second, while the fact that I earned a Master of Divinity degree is not by itself evidence of my acknowledgment or privileging of unknowing (as there are plenty of theologians who claim to know much more than I think they do) the theology tradition that resonated with me most, is.

While in Divinity School I became partial to *apophatic* or negative theology, which claims that God is unknowable. To call God “Father,” for example, is to shrink God to fit into our linguistic frames, and although language is, arguably, all we have, we must recognize that sometimes our socially constructed metaphors do more harm than good. Although I will return to the subject of theology and Simic in a discussion of my “God” series, for the moment all of this is to say that perhaps I am predisposed to identifying with Simic’s celebration of uncertainty and imagination in both form and content.

I credit poets Donna de la Perriere and Joseph Lease for influencing my earliest work. Before it came out in his book, *Testify*, Joseph Lease sent me his poem, “America,” which seems to mourn the consequences of capitalism, technology, and war. “America” contains images of food, and the discovery that it is spoiled. Without any interpretive training, I imagined he was saying that America is also spoiled. I was intrigued by Lease’s use of repeated phrases in this poem such as, “Say democracy: say free and responsible government, say popular consent:” (18). The repetitions hold the American reader accountable to these ideas. They act as a sort of interrogation, as if to evoke, in “America,” a sense of shame for having lost the values that we once claimed as central to our national identity. Lease’s poem is a sophisticated analysis of the polarization of American politics.

With the form and content of Lease’s “America” in mind, I wrote “This Is Your Brain,” utilizing a litany of repeated phrases that describe my America, from my perspective as a young adult child of the 1980’s (and Regan’s “Just Say No” campaign), underemployed, frantic, living by the clock yet hopeful as I canvassed for Obama and felt more freedom as a woman than my grandmother had. In the poem the speaker’s fretting about working multiple low-wage jobs and

media overload is counterbalanced with images of swimming in water and ocean birds. In those days, living in North Carolina, working as a nanny, a community organizer, a bookstore employee, and a yoga teacher, I would often jump in a nearby river to cool off after driving home in my non-air conditioned car, and I would sometimes drive two hours to swim in the ocean. Natural bodies of water have always been important to my sanity, probably from having grown up swimming in Lake Michigan. One thing that I like about “This is Your Brain” is its chaos. It’s a text that I think is open to interpretation. It’s no sophisticated analysis; rather, it’s a chaotic slice of a frantic life. It seems like Lease’s formula of repeated phrases with surprise endings works well for me in this poem in that it simulates the way a busy mind cycles through and blends together random thoughts, as in the lines, “Try skipping work one day / Try wrapping yourself in fleece / Try Ativan... Have some Obama stickers” (lines 2, 3, 26).

Even after Obama was first elected, I continued to struggle with underemployment and lack of health insurance. I began to only half joke about getting on a boat back to Europe, my ancestors’ motherland, where they now have a social welfare system. When it came out in 2009, I read Donna de la Perriere’s book, *True Crime*, which presents a Flannery O’Connor-esque picture of the deep south, perhaps Georgia, the place where de la Perriere is from, with all of its flawed characters. *True Crime* contains a third person prose poem entitled “Wash Fragment (Shirley in the Yard)” that paints a scene in which a grown woman climbs into a rusted out washing machine sitting on the edge of someone’s property (10). “Found,” another poem from this collection, is a persona poem in the voice of a guy who digs graves for a living, is obsessed with his cars, has a bunch of bull pups, and never visited his pregnant girlfriend in the hospital after she wrecked his car and before she died (12). de la Perriere’s characters made me think of

the poor immigrant side of my own family, and I decided to try to write about my ancestral past.

I began to wonder what my great grandparents would think of America now, and what their experiences of immigration must have been like. So I started writing portraits of their lives, which are somewhat imaginary, and somewhat based on research and family stories. In my poems, “Mary Gable Goresch(ski),” “Fighter,” and “Fragments of Agnes,” I imagine what life was like for them, particularly from the point of view of the women. In “Mary Gable Goresch(ski),” I tried to imagine what it would be like to give birth to 12 children, and having one die of sickness in childhood. In “Fighter” I imagined a scene from the childhood of my very scrappy grandmother Agnes, who I imagine learned at a young age to use her fists “like little loaded guns.” “Fragments of Agnes” is a fragmentary poem containing the only snapshots I know about her life-story. Finally, I wrote “We Came Here For A Better Life,” a litany of family stories that includes the men’s points of view about getting laid off, drinking too much, and getting in bar fights with cousins. Together these poems paint a picture of struggle and loss influenced by immigration itself and race, class, gender, and religion.

These “ancestor” poems are another example of using what I know and experimenting with what I don’t know in terms of both form and content. I did not know very much, at the time of drafting these poems, about things such as line breaks and punctuation in poetry. My formal decisions in this series were based on a combination of my observations of the poetry of Lease and de la Perriere, as well as my own intuitive process. For the most part, I think it worked out okay. I had the privilege of being able to read these poems on a couple of occasions in Durham and I felt somewhat surprised and deeply gratified when people I hadn’t previously known would tell me, after the readings, how they could really relate to the ancestor poems, or how those

poems reminded them of their families. I knew with these poems I had captured something that translates as something readers can relate to, which is one of my primary goals as a poet.

I suppose the ancestor poems mark the beginning of my penchant for writing series and variations on a theme. Since beginning the graduate program in creative writing at CMU last spring, I have been building various themes and series simultaneously. The themes and series in this collection include nature, courtly love, reflections on aging, and God. Because I have learned so much about poetry in such a short time, it is difficult now to trace my poetic origins and influences from this program with much precision other than to say that I think I am somehow growing in my understanding of relationships between form and content, and in interpretive and technical skills. Expanding the little I know about poetry has given me the freedom to experiment with a wider range of forms and techniques. In this year of intense poetic experimentation, I feel I have become more deeply rooted in my practice of Simic's notions of uncertainty and imagination when it comes to form and theme. Often my most recent poems have taken on elements of tragicomic, sometimes mythic, surrealism, or an imagism that holds up the wonder of daily life without romanticism.

In the poems with environmental themes, nonhuman nature participates in the violence of human relationship. Nature either receives our violence, or deals a sort of harshness back to us along with its beauty. In "Empire's Graveyard," for example, the speaker narrates a walk along the beach "over exoskeletons," picking them up "like money" and clinking them together "like wind chimes" (lines 1-3). The poem opens with evidence of death and the dominance of the human over nonhuman nature. The speaker comes across a dead jellyfish and begins to muse about the cause of death, absurdly invoking frames of science and psychology while noting the

plastic in the ocean, wildfires burning in the distance, and a military chopper, a symbol of colonization. By the end, the self-reflective speaker comes to the realization that not only does she contribute to environmental harm, like plastic in the ocean, but also that her impulse to dissect, her desire to know scientifically, is a colonial impulse.

In my more recent nature poems, nature is dealing the blows. As I mentioned earlier, the trees in the poem “Field Education” deliver slaps in the face and pokes in the eye. In the poem, “Summer Comes to Michigan (Home of Seasonal Affective Disorder),” the speaker sings her favorite summer tunes with the kind of lightness that follows the survival of a harsh winter. My “Winter Companion” series, about the cardinal perched on the branch outside my window, carries the connotation of winter as a kind of sickness reminiscent of death, or an enclosure, preventing strange love between human and bird. In all of these poems, the backdrop of winter seems unforgiving with its bitter wind and scarcity of seed and monochrome sky. The red cardinal is a steadfast flame, a friend, a symbol, perhaps, of survival. The cardinal poems are surreal in that they imagine the affection between bird and speaker to an absurd extreme, and also imagistic in that they take “care toward the actual, the sheer wonder of dailiness” as Simic describes (347). The cardinal in one poem is just a comforting winter sojourner with the speaker. The speaker longs for the cardinal to come inside, nest in her hair, give her courage. In the sestina, the speaker feels mounting paranoia about the gaze of the cardinal, and then that paranoia becomes a projected fantasy of unrequited love. Nature is both a symbol and the thing symbolized and acts as a complex subject.

Continuing in an anti-romantic vein, my thesis also contains a series of “bad” love poems, which may sometimes be relatively bad poems in that they use clichéd tropes and almost

always illustrate the failure of heterosexual romantic love. These poems represent my observation that love often fails in ways that are painfully funny or at least entertainingly painful. The lovers in most of these poems are archetypal fools. Laughing at their failure is like laughing at the America's Funniest Home Video episodes in which people unexpectedly get wacked in the face by a 2x4. Read through a Bakhtinian lens, this impulse or ability to laugh at our own and each other's pain functions simultaneously as identification with humanity, a corrective to our delusions of grandeur, and a momentary triumph over our misery. We laugh embarrassedly, knowing we are all exactly that vulnerable, desperate or horrible. We locate the pain outside of ourselves and conquer it with laughter. Laughter is a sign of survival (Bakhtin 55-60). I wrote these bad love poems in a variety of styles with the intention of creating a sad/funny and even a mean/funny quality.

In the poem "The Date," I was trying to follow the style of some of Robert Creeley's descriptive poems with very short lines. Some examples from Creeley in this style include "A Token," "The People," or "The Wife." The date in my poem is a complete clown with an attitude of entitlement and very low social IQ. The date wears an oversized Lion's jersey and has a "proclivity for staying too long" (line 8). He "tries to hold her hand/ moves in for the kiss/ at the end/ and fails to taste/ her rejection" (16-21). While parodying the idea of romance and the perfect date or the perfect man, or even the idea of a woman waiting to be swept off her feet, this poem unfortunately sums up a number of dates that I have actually been on.

I wrote "Spinster" and "Old Man" as companion persona poems, my first experiment with this form. In addition to admiring de la Perriere's persona poem, "Found," about the horrible guy who digs graves for a living, I have also come to greatly admire Ai's persona

poems. Her “The Testimony of J. Robert Oppenheimer” might be my new favorite poem of all time because of her exquisite use of language and image, the subject matter, and the way Ai nails the voice of a hubristic, scientific socio-path. Both “Found” and “The Testimony of J. Robert Oppenheimer” use a bit of irony to capture a cynical sentiment about humanity, and men in particular. I suppose my companion poems about would-be companions share a bit of that cynicism. However, in terms of language, image, and narrative creativity, I still have a lot of work to do before reaching the level of genius that Ai and de la Perriere reach.

There is one love poem in my collection that is a good poem about good love. I wrote “Anniversary Poem” for my housemates for their 58th wedding anniversary. I suppose love that has lasted any less than 58 years has yet to prove itself. I wrote this poem as an ekphrastic exercise. During an independent study with Allegra Blake, she had me take some pictures with my iPad and write ekphrastic poems about the pictures. Although my iPad photo isn’t a good photograph, the photo still generated what I consider my only good love poem. The methodology of this exercise helped me to develop my ability for visual descriptions in poems. As a poet I tend to struggle with detailed descriptions and visuals images, as I am naturally much more oriented toward meaning and interpretation as well as sound. I like “Anniversary Poem” for its sound as well. It moves really fast with a lot of rhyme as does a lifetime of good companionship. The following lines demonstrate my use of short sentences and rhyme to create a fast pace: “We have seen our friends go, / our children grow. / Our home décor is retro” (lines 11-14).

Finally, the longest series in this collection is the sequence of God poems. I think I am most entertained in writing the God poems because they are one of the few ways in which my

first master's degree, a Master of Divinity, has much relevance for me these days. I have been steeped in a theological tradition and culture, and there seem to be very few outlets for my thoughts about that experience after the fact. Apparently I still have much to say about the way that tradition talks about God.

The mainline Church professes to know what God is doing, which I think is a ridiculous and sometimes dangerous assumption. The eastern orthodox tradition of *apohatic* theology would call using language to create God in our own image a form of idolatry. According to Bakhtin, religious parody has existed since the Middle Ages, and has functioned as such as a corrective to oppressive religious hierarchy (70-79). Many of my God poems are meant to elicit laughter in mockery of popular male God images by creating a character who is a well-meaning, yet bumbling old man. In these poems, God is helplessly narcissistic and insufferably patriarchal until He realizes He's actually gay, and then His character begins to experience his feelings and gradually go through a feminist transformation that leads Him to wear a dress and dance at a drag show. God exists within a pantheon of other gods from other traditions, especially those from Greek Mythology. He has a slightly competitive, yet affectionate relationship with these other deities. Through the course of this series, I gradually recreate God in my own image, but I don't take myself too seriously. I try to counterbalance what I see as the harms of patriarchal Christianity. I am aware that I am reading Christianity dialogically, critiquing the dominant aspect of the tradition using a more justice-oriented, yet still legitimate, aspect of that same tradition, rather than actually claiming to know what God is doing.

In creating a God that takes on the characteristics of "a slob like one of us," as in Joan Osborne's 1995 hit, "One of Us," I am hoping to elicit what Bakhtin might label a carnivalesque

laughter, one that levels the religious hierarchy. Theoretically, putting God through all kinds of awkwardness and human suffering gives everyday people power over the forces of institutional dominance, and perhaps gives them the freedom to imagine God in more liberating ways (Bakhtin 70-79).

I am especially thankful to Pam Ushuck, from the Prague Summer Program, for encouraging me to write more God poems. I brought three God poems to Prague that I had randomly cooked up in the shower last spring. I came home from a summer in Prague with three more, and the series has grown since then. My workshop classmates at CMU, all of whom I consider exceptionally talented poets, continued to encourage my writing of the God poems, and they have helped me to revise and expand them. When something feels like it might be working, it can be scary to change it. My classmates have encouraged courageous revisions that have given the God poems more imagery and more depth of meaning to add to the surface level quips. Finally, I've been surprised and delighted that my housemates and their local senior citizen friends are big fans of the God poems. Their feedback makes me feel less like a blasphemous infidel, and only fuels my irreverence. I am thrilled to think I am creating something for everyday people.

My excitement for this series has, in some ways, taken away some of the tedium and the feeling of hard work in producing these poems. I have a subject that entertains me and with that baseline I have been able to try a number of new things in terms of form and content. The poem, "God's Trip to Prague," contains so many absurd, surreal images. The images are real—I really did see the Lord's Prayer written on a human hair—but putting them in the context of God going on vacation makes for a vivid, surreal poem: "When God hovers over Prague first he sees / so

many graven images, hears / jackhammers mixed with Mozart, smells / cigarette smoke and Vlatava” (lines 18-21).

The poem, “Bored One Day After His Wife Has Left,” takes the form of a written correspondence between God and one of his children. God intends to sit on his throne and read fan mail when he reads a note from one of his children, Jennifer, who writes pleading with Him to try wearing a dress. I tried this correspondence form after reading Matthew Olzman’s “For a Recently Discovered Shipwreck at the Bottom of Lake Michigan” in which the poem’s speaker sends written correspondences to a shipwreck, and then gets mad when the shipwreck fails to respond (45-47). One of the speaker’s letters asserts that the shipwreck might represent God to the speaker (46). I don’t think my correspondence poem with God is nearly as funny or absurd as Olzman’s; still, the form works well for the content. I would like to be as funny as Olzman someday.

I enjoy funny, surreal poems, and I hope I will always write them. After this program, I will be a lone poet, participating in community writing groups, and writing by myself on Friday nights. For that life, this master’s degree has introduced me to many new contemporary poets to read as well as new interpretive tools with which to read them. In writing I have some new technical smarts, and overall a much wider palate of poetic resources to use as I continue to experiment with poetry. I hope to continue to diversify my poetic tendencies. I hope to grow in technical precision, and cleverness with language and sound, as well as in levels of absurdity and humor, without ever losing depth of meaning.

I hope that I can now help to give community people access to reading and writing poetry. I would like to be a part of teaching poetry workshops that encourage community people

to write poetry. As a writer, I will feel very satisfied if I am writing poems to which non-academic people can relate. I also hope to publish a book so that my poems might find a popular audience. I realize that being published in academic journals is the process by which to publish a book, which can then be made available to those outside the academy. Therefore, finally, my one of my goals is to begin to look for places to submit my work.

God Gave Birth

Alone in the darkness
God moaned the blues
undulating his belly.
Although He cried out,
there was no one to hear Him.
No girlfriend, no midwife,
no wife, mother.

Finally, God's water broke and formed salty oceans.
For seven days, God pushed
and pushed matter through water
making mountains, fields, pushed
light away from dark,
each contraction, a day of labor
to create cosmos and creature,
pushing until He could hear
the cold, vulnerable universe howl.

Afterwards, God would not forget the pain.
He resolved not to go through that again,
not alone like that. He decided on a division of labor.

Mary (Gable) Goresch(ski)

Mary carried babies
twelve of them
in her womb
one at a time
nine months a piece
then on her wide hips
eleven of them
two at a time
for twelve years.

Her lips carried broken English and Polish
cuss words.

On her apron she carried
bacon grease spattered
from the stove where she stood
for hours, days, years
and flour from her pastries
made from scratch—the Polish way.
Her apron was spotted
With spit-up stains
And her own breast milk
Whenever one of the babies cried.
Her apron carried her
redemption (or her penance)
because if she weren't pregnant or nursing
she would be some kind of whore
going around causing men
to sin.

She remembers carrying in her heart
dreams of America
as a shining cornucopia
and now, stern faced, she carries
her twelfth child
to his tiny wooden coffin.

Field Education

The high grass is a soft lime-green bed
matted down where deer have slept
and becomes sharp, shining,
all metallic at sunrise and sunset
when it means to wake you up.
The high grass will take you
to the base of the trees,
standing columns of water
much like our bodies
except trees are really mad
ancestors whispering
all your answers
when you're not listening
and slapping your face
when you're not looking,
reaching out to poke you
right in the eyes
until all you can do is think
home smells like this.
This is how you learn
to pay attention.

Wired God

God enters a friendly competition for followers
with the other gods in order to gain the attention
of the wired generation.

He considers starting a Facebook fan page
because Facebook worked
for the feminist, Ryan Gosling.

God has barred himself
from threatening to flood the earth again,
and so He snaps selfies in front of
each of the Seven Wonders of the World.

Then He remembers
that no one can see His face.

He feels indignant at the worlds
that technically He created
but from which He is now technologically excluded.

God sighs and considers
creating a cosmic network
exclusively for himself and the other gods.

He clicks on a meme of Ryan Gosling,
ripped, and quoting Gloria Anzaldua.

God's Wife

God's wife misses the God of her youth.
In class he would pass her notes that said,
"Do you love me? Check yes, no, or maybe."

She would always check the "yes" box
then send the note back saying,
"Do you exist? Check yes, no, or maybe."

God would usually check "maybe"
then slip the note through the slot in her locker,
except when they were at church camp.
There He always colored in the "yes" box,
and drew a little heart around it.
He would pass the note back in the mess hall
through the table of boys
who were blowing milk through their noses.

Nowadays God sends her a text
that says, "I'm not dead."
She texts back,
"You give me a headache."

Motherland

What was Poland may have been
the Ukraine or Prussia, Germany, Austria.
What is Goresch may have been Goryszski, Gorysz, Gorish—
anything starting with G between 1896 and 1908.

Begin by boarding a vessel.
Ride with your husband and child
in a dark steerage cabin,
in which you lose your lunch

and question what possessed you
to make this voyage.
A couple of lifetimes later,

when the ship has docked,
step out onto the motherland.
Walk until your shoes wear through.
Try asking for work
or a ride,

stop and venerate the patron saint.
Czestochowa, Black Madonna,
protector of Poland,
show us the way.

Awaken to rolling hills.
Think pigs in a blanket.
Walk down the cow path

to the party your neighbor is throwing
in honor of her grandson's baptism.
Be sure to wear the costume jewelry
you've been hiding in your pocket.

Sabbath

God jumps in the lake
at the end of a hot day
not wearing a stitch

God's Trip to Prague

For centuries, Prague has been erecting statues:
saints looking down, sinners looking up
or was it the other way around?
All in hopes that when God returns
He will come to Prague first
As if it were a stop on some kind of world tour
the way The Rolling Stones came and lit up the town,
after the fucking communists fell.
If the Stones returned each year,
surely God would be intrigued.
After all, where else could He see
the Lord's Prayer written on a human hair
or Jesus' face painted on a poppyseed?
Their monasteries featured the best breweries
because Prague knew God was the kind
to really appreciate a good ale.

When God hovers over Prague first he sees
so many graven images, hears
jackhammers mixed with Mozart, smells
cigarette smoke and Vlatava.
He laughs with the sinners and cries with the saints,
or is it the other way around?
The other gods entertain him:
a baby Jesus coated in gold, a Golem,
a Mary who catches a thief by the arm—
God knows the way beauty rips through dissonance
eventually, even through terror.
The only thing that really undoes him
is the symmetry of the gardens.

Michigan Haiku

When evening arrives
the moon bobs on the great lake
buoying sailboats home

At night in the field
crickets chant the names of God
a cool mist rises

White pines hang in there
through wind, ice, and snow
sheltering the birds

The first crocus
pushes up through leaves
in May

At the beach
torrid sand sings
under my thirsty feet

The silver poplars
shimmering, bid me welcome
my first summer home

God's Revelation

God's wife finally leaves him, because after two millennia of praising him, he never praised her back. As He hovers over the American Academy of Religion, listening to all of his self-appointed psychoanalysts talk about themselves, God realizes that all this time, He's really been into men... Even when, as a teenager, He knocked up that virgin, Mary, it was really Joseph he was screwing. God admits to an ontological fart.

What God had with His wife was more like friendship. Nobody else's blaspheme tickled him the way hers did. She'd cuss Him around the cosmos and he would wind up rolling on the floor with laughter. He'll miss that.

God feels free to love now. He hopes He will meet a nice man. They'll get married and this time, set an egalitarian example for the children. God loves His children, even if he hasn't always been the best father.

Garden Party

feathered ice cream Sunday
Is this too Banana Republic for you?
superman and sorbet
with cherry
or just funky-ugly enough?
cute but a little loud
loud but a bit too cute
maybe it depends on the degree to which
you can slide your ass into them
pillowcase?
after the ice cream
and the cherry
Once I had a green paisley suitcase
Now I have a green paisley skirt

God Gets Angry

God pulls up Google Earth and watches
the world, keeping tabs on the continents.
He contemplates the communication
mishaps, the distance between
what He knows He said
and what people have heard,
apparently, or how they have chosen
to rebel.

Seeing a field, red and gold, God
remembers when communism was His idea.
He had it well documented in multiple books,
lost count of commands to care
for the poor the widow the orphan, share
all things in common, and every
year of Jubilee, forgive
all debts and let all slaves be free.

Still it went awry when Marxism
manifested starvation and statues
of Stalin instead of Grace, stomping
on, again, God's *chosen* people.

This really peeves Him.

God zooms in on the red and blue states
and notes that Capitalism, by way of contrast,
was never His idea. Yet it's often attributed
to Him, more or less.

When He thinks about corporate tax breaks,
God stomps His foot in a fit of rage
and dials up an attorney
with plans to beat those capitalists
at their own god-damned game.

We Came Here For a Better Life

We got a silver bullet Streamline trailer
We got sauerkraut and cigarettes
We got sent to the back of the line
We got the switch
We came home from the line with busted Pollock lips
We got drunk
We got in bar fights with our second cousins
We got too many mouths to feed
We got the pink slip
We lost the last baby in infancy
We got a divorce
We got excommunicated
We got AIDS
We died of suicide
We got a pedophile cousin in prison
We make one mean apple pie

Summer comes to Michigan
(Home of Seasonal Affective Disorder)

Give me the greens of summer
after seven months of permafrost.
Little darlin', It's been a long cold lonely winter.
Makes me wonder how the Anishinabe survived here
with slate washed skies dumping sleet and snow.
How I lived a childhood in snow—sing oh, January oh.

Yet we survive—here we are

So rock me on the water – roll me on the river
Michigan seems like a dream to me now
With June's yellow-green light
shimmering through leaves,
reflecting off brown high water,
running fast and cold
over ancient freckled river rocks.
Makes me think all the world's a sunny day.

When winter comes again this will be the river
I will skate away on.

This is Your Brain

The dinger means my laundry is done
Try skipping work one day
Try wrapping yourself in fleece
Try Ativan
The dinger means my pasta is done
In water, you could be anywhere right now
You are here
You could do anything right now
You are swimming in this water
The dinger means you have to go home
even though you don't want to

Post-Colonial, Post-Modern, Post-Global Capitalism
Resist—religious violence, epistemic violence
any kind of violence
Can't find work—Can't work?
You are a lousy American
Say Anything
Say Sand-piper
Say how much you love me
My grandmother would love all of this

Talk more
Breathe more
Play more with children
Write as much as you want
(A new way to be a woman)
Have some Obama stickers
Listen to the birds
Listen to the waves

God Watches the Midway

Suspended in space from rickety installations,
youth zips by in screams of fear and pleasure.

The Ferris Wheel in the foreground now
rotates a community of souls
through time and space, each one
in its own parachute-like compartment
at the top, seeing everything
the way it is, the soul so light
it might float away if not connected
to the others. First the wheel turns too
slow, then too fast. All too soon
it begins again to empty and fill.

Fragments of Agnes

1.

Her feet were little blocks of ice
skating under lake effect snow
her knuckles bruised from knocking
on doors to ask for work
depression within Depression

2.

She gave back the rings
on two separate occasions saying
“they thought they owned me”

There was the impossibility
of goodness after abortion
so she went out dancing
on Lakeshore Drive where
the Coastguard boys spun records
of Benny Goodman and Bing

3.

She worked the line with the women
At the Continental Aviation Factory
Building the Skypower Propeller
was not empowering when
she already had the muscle
was not patriotic when
she needed the wage

4.

The next time she got pregnant
She married the sailor turned trucker
She managed the money
made the Pierogi

5.

Her mercurial moods—her rages
her ashen billows
her costume jewelry
her toys on the Christmas tree
her deep-dish apple pie

Empire's Graveyard

1.

I walk over exoskeletons.
I pick them up like money
Clink them together like wind chimes.

All of their inhabitants are gone.
These are their remains.

Smoke sears my lungs,
wildfire burns up alligators in Dare.

A military copter chops overhead
in the direction of Camp LeJune.

2.

Empire means: Conquer
as a way of knowing.

For example: I saw a dead jellyfish
Washed up on shore. My inclination,
To dissect. (What color is the heart?)
(Where is the stomach located?)
(What was the cause of death?)

Did this jellyfish puncture its transparent skin
on a tin can and ooze out? Swallow a piece of plastic,
brightly colored bait brought out to sea by tide?
Absorb too many oil dispersants? Or was there
a subtle change in the eco-system's balance
(not enough oxygen in the water, maybe)?
Do sea creatures grow malignancies? Suffer
genetic deformations? Cardiac arrest? Ennui?

Empire assumes: the increase in my life expectancy
Directly correlates with the decrease in yours,
It means: I am the cause of death as well as its colonizer.

Ancient God

In America, when God wrestles with His children
God is the one who shuffles away with a limp.

God is a wilderness and a few Canadian Lakes
shorter than He used to be.

Seeing the world through the fissures in His eyes,
everything looks broken.

Being praised on Sunday mornings
doesn't interest Him anymore.

Instead, He attends a yoga class
in order to regain His balance and His strength.

Another fall, He thinks, would really be
devastating at this point.

Bored One Day After His Wife Has Left

God sits on the throne
and opens some fan-mail:

*Dear God,
Some of us at the Divinity school
really think you should try
wearing a dress,
a silky sashay.
Just a suggestion.
Love, your child,
Jennifer*

*Dear Jennifer,
Thanks for the laugh.
With Love,
Your Heavenly Father*

*Dear God,
No, we are completely serious about the dress.
We have created a petition in this regard.
Please try on a dress—we think you'll like it.
Plus, it would mean a lot to us down here.
Please? Love, Jennifer*

God sighs a laugh and writes back

*Dear Jennifer,
I appreciate your concern and
will take the matter under consideration.
Yours truly, God the Father*

God floats over to his wife's wardrobe
(what He won't do for His children)
and sees she left a few of her dresses.
He suddenly feels heavy, can't today.

God slumps back into His throne,
missing His wife.

The Fall

1.

Finally, I had to go.
Having been suspended in space, weightless
arms full of combustible old tomes, the hardest
mineral, soft metal bands and bible.
I had grown weary of
watching out for
the catastrophic collision
that would finally decimate
my already smoldering planet.

Letting go, I became an asteroid
falling fast, heavy and hard,
anticipating impact
until suddenly, just before
gravity's end
I became a small, dry, spherical sponge,
landing in the grass with a light bounce.

2.

I have seven lives left.
The first life burned through at the speed of light.
This life is sleepy, clawing, spoiled and orange.
The third life is a bluebird singing her song.
I have yet to be reborn as the meadow,
as the milkweed, as the monarch, and the moon.
In the last life I will break apart
and fall down as sweet rain,
Evaporating before I reach the ground.

3.

The first time you go
the fall feels
like dying.
The next time,
the death
feels like
flying.

In Autumn God Gets Heavy into Art

He does not adhere to any one palate
ignores all of the rules
of saturation, texture, shape, color
uses them all at once
and manages to make something
spectacular, something the other gods
(and everyone, really)
tries to mimic
until God gets carried away,
goes so crazy with color
that everything turns brown, gray.
Things fall apart, begin to die
into a sad stark beauty.
The other gods
don't know how He does it.

Ward (How We Celebrate Halloween)

Windows glazed with rain
Eyes glazed with Thorazine

We're all dressed up in costumes
Read: Pale green hospital clothes

The doctor is the mad scientist
His nurse, Medusa

Ghost equals Patient
Zombie, empty container

Voices in the halls or in our heads
At night we dream of the undead

We all want to get out of here
I mean, our bodies

I could escape through the bars
Sleep with the dead

Medusa brings more candy
I only pretend to swallow

The Date

tries so hard
not to reveal
awareness

of his bald spot
overbite
soft stomach
oversized Lions jersey

proclivity for staying too long
assuming too much
falling too fast
in love

overrides it all
with the positive self-talk
he has practiced

tries to hold her hand
moves in for
the kiss

at the end
and fails to taste
her rejection

Fighter

When Aggie was small, she tiptoed across the hardwood floor to a tiny door in the wall of the bedroom. The 5 o'clock October light slanted in the window. Her mother's torn lace curtains cast a haunted shadow on the floor. Aggie folded her knees up to her chest, and, holding on to the overhead bar in the little storage space, guided herself in sideways and pulled the door all the way closed behind her. She liked the smallness of her body, her secret world, the snug feeling of her blond curls smushed against the wall.

She did not think about the dust grinding into the dress that she would be wearing to school for 3 more days that week. She came to talk to the ghosts, alone. And that was all she thought about. She wanted to know the names of the spirits that moved her tiddlywinks while she slept. She needed to tell the spiders to keep it down, that she was always in trouble for the racket they made.

In the house, sisters clanked the dishes they set on the table. Papa's angry boots tromped in the hall. Brothers stampeded into the house. Papa and the oldest boys got first sitting. When her brother Topy called for her, little Aggie stretched her feet through the tiny doorway and inched out of the storage space on her bottom. It was then that she saw her ruined dress, lost her appetite and stealthily slid on her back underneath the open-spring bed. The ghosts and spiders followed her. A tiny black and white jumping spider hopped onto her nose. She calmly flicked it off with her thumb and middle finger, whispering, "not now."

Already she would go to bed without supper. Already she could feel papa's heavy leather belt blistering her back. The longer she stayed hidden the worse it would be. She knew that. This is when the ghosts first began to teach Aggie to fight. The first lesson: there are no rules. The ghosts taught her how to slam doors, when to throw elbows and insults, stomp, kick, box and bite. When Aggie finally emerged, her fists were cocked like little loaded guns.

God Visits Terezin for the First Time in 57 years

In the secret prayer cellar He writes, *I was here*.
God heaves, leans on the damp prison wall,
and remembers when He was the one in solitary
who could not stand up for another second, draw
another breath of intoxicated air, could not
get up to relieve himself,
was up against the execution wall, guns
aimed at his chest for sending
a post card, making music, composing
a symphony of truth. The Nazi's called his crimes
propaganda of terror.
Sometimes the truth is terrible, He would respond,
as though they'd recognize his voice.
They put Him to digging a swimming pool
with his bare hands in winter
for the commander's daughter,
ordered Him to dig a ditch and jump
across. When He fell, they would bury him.
And when He was an angel-faced child
in the care of the Jewish mothers
and sisters who taught Him to draw pictures,
write poems, believe they would all be free soon,
deep down He knew, the way children know,
that they would die first. He remembers
in each and every final moment searching
those soldiers' eyes for His own image.
He was there at their births, and now this—
now this. He could be brave
when He was the one in those places,
but He could not stand to watch it happen to His people.
If He lost His faith in those times, He would have to forgive Himself.

Now the doors of solitary stand open.
In the cemetery, the roses bloom.
God sings Kaddish and places one stone
on each and every stone.

Dream in Which You Can't Save Me

You offer me refuge
a doorjamb in your house

when everything crumbles
you are the host

and none of the guests seem
concerned

You give me a kayak
in the sea, and nose first
it begins to sink

In the hospital
while organizing your books

I ask the English professor why
nobody here believes in

reading slowly. It's all quantity.
It's all macho, capitalist overload.

He says English encourages slow reading.
I want to believe.

Avert Your Gaze

You viewed my *Linkedin* Profile?
You bastard! Now
I have to burn it
the way I burned
our wedding album
seven years ago,
demonic blue smoke
swirling
as I drove away.
What I meant was,
don't ever
look at me
that way
again.

God Gets the Blues

The other gods are married
God feels like a key without a car

The other gods make love
God never gets that far

The other gods get gifts of gold
God is paying alimony

The other gods cook lentil stews
God eats white bread and bologna

The other gods winter in Mexico
God hibernates in Michigan

The other gods file their tax returns
God is the King of procrastination

The other gods go out to play shuffleboard
God stays in and mopes

God sings the blues by Himself
This is how God copes

Winter Companion

A Cardinal perches on the naked branch
outside my window. We exchange gazes
of fantasy and delusion. All winter long
he watches me sit in bed and hack with fever.
I wish he could come inside, nest in the crook
of my warm neck and sing his secrets in
my pinkish ear. In the wind, he sits,
a flame against the grassy sky, as if
witnessing oceans, unexpected visions
of friends long dead, exuding counterintuitive
peace about the sleep awaiting us, the scenes
of snow reflecting blinding light. We'll abandon
perch if and when summer comes, to peck
around the arid land. We'll fly, and return
next year as all lucky creatures do.

God Finds Christmas

At Christmas, God gets depressed
knows He should be happy
with all of the Glorias floating heavenward
but every year it seems harder to hear
a Magnificat, bring something holy
to a world manic with powdered sugar and door-busters.
God listens to the prayers of the ones who weep,
sinks to earth, roams on His own, stopping
next to each solitary creature.

On his own personal light tour,
God finds a demonstration in Raleigh.
A thousand or so are gathered
in the rain to protest the state's
oppression of the poor. When the crowd
sings *this little light of mine*,
i'm gonna let it shine, God sings along.
Belting out the chorus, He waves
his index finger in the air, His little light.

Winter Companion

A cardinal, a shock of color perches
on the naked limb outside
my window as I sit
on the bed reading, watching
the snow. We exchange curious
glances, his brilliant red body
resting on a snowy branch
against an endless slate of
gray sky. In my chest
I feel his poetry, stillness
as if he were there
to witness zen amidst scarcity
of seed, indifference to bitter
wind. No, even more. Abundance,
beauty beyond what is necessary.
When summer comes we both
abandon perch to peck around
the earth, fly, or scavenge,
or splash in separate wellsprings.
We return again in winter
to perch, gaze, and wonder.

God's Winter Weight

In January God is in a good mood,
the holidays behind Him.
Winter grows His pleasure body
with candles, friends, blueberry scones.
He thinks the extra layers emphasize
His grandeur, and He floats around
scattering blessings on the earth:
The bullets of big game hunters
along the Eastern Cape keep
missing their targets. A bomb
on a Syrian bus fails to detonate.
A pair of soul mates, one from Paraguay
the other from China, meet
on Pintrest. God even
sweet talks Mother Nature
into giving Michigan a sunny day.

Spinster

By this time my friends are mostly married. Some have children. Some have been married long enough for the invulnerability of youth to have faded and are heading for divorce. A new batch of used men will be on the market soon. This does not enliven my hope or interest in the least. I am passing my time, or was most recently passing it, with a few forbidden trysts with a sexy, old professor. And when I say old, I don't mean former. I mean he sets his alarm for 6am to take his blood pressure medicine. I have deemed him my geriatric lover, which makes it sound as though he is one among many lovers, but he is not. Of the two of us, I am the lonelier. I know this because the last time we were together he decided that since he was wide awake at 6am, he might as well head on home, and I was the one to broach the subject of when we might meet again. Maybe it was my insecurity about not putting out like normal girls, or just a natural desire to be loved, which leads to too much forgiveness of too many flaws, but I felt the thrill had fizzled for him and he wouldn't call again. I wanted to be the one to close the door on this one. I wanted him to call just so that I could act interested and then somehow, through no fault of my own, fail to show. Closing the door is undoubtedly the right move. Anyway, I am happier alone, with my paintings and my poetry. And, what with his S&M fantasies, it wouldn't have lasted.

Old Man

What can I say? I am a middle-aged man who likes to have sex with younger women. There is nothing unusual about that. Everyone knows that women my age have lost interest in sex. I have never believed in marriage and there is not much to do in Whiteville. I'm a musician, and I know how to woo a younger woman. I have composed several good lines to this end. Most recently I wooed a woman 24 years my junior. I told her I liked her art and that she looked like Joni Mitchell, that, like Joni, she had a strange sort of beauty. Artistic women do not like to be seen as ordinary, they worship Joni Mitchell, and they tend to go for the slightly tortured soul. I am a good guy. I always pay for a nice dinner and I never stay for breakfast because I do not want to lead a young woman on. In bed I like to be in charge. It can be difficult to gauge whether any given woman will go for this, but I feel my chances are better with young women and with artists. When she asked out of innocent curiosity how I discovered my S&M fantasies, I answered, "by writing about them." I sensed it was time to leave, and it was also time to take my blood pressure medication.

Winter Companion

The branches look frosted with snow
on the trees outside my window.
There is a milky backdrop of sky
and a red flare, a bird on a branch.
A male cardinal gazes in at me
and I think, we are never alone,

not even if we want to be alone.
That bird is watching more than snow.
He surveys his kingdom, which includes me
doing God knows what through the window.
Perhaps he sits on that bare branch
as part of the scenery, trees and sky,

ogling women as they watch the skies
for weather, thinking they are alone,
have escaped the male gaze, but the branch
holds a peeping-tom sending signals through snow
to the woman on the other side of the window.
I am sure now he fixates on me.

He may be plotting against me
or falling in love, wishing the sky
did not end with this window,
this barrier keeping me alone,
away from the wonder of snow
and his home, that naked branch.

I could never live on a branch,
not even for love, if he asked me.
My feathers are not right for snow,
I would say. If he said the sky
was our limit, I'd stand alone
and motion him to the window.

I would open my window
and extend my hand like a branch
so as to speak to him alone.
I would draw his red body to me
and send him off to the sky
where he could fly with the snow.

I am alone, and a cardinal adores me
through a window, perched on his lonesome branch
in a sky full of strange affection and snow.

God Remodels

Missing his wife one day, God
starts on the honey-do list
she left pinned to the fridge.
Install a garbage disposal. New
Floral tapestry to recover the old sofa.
Countertops and cupboards, maybe.
He might try that new painting technique
using greens and golds. Bold.
New floors. Cherry wood, maybe.
Knock out that wall and build a sunroom.
God discovers that home renovation is really His thing
And fortunately, God's house has many rooms.
He decorates them all with fresh flowers
and squash casserole to welcome
his children, and the grands.
Slapping a fresh coat of salmon color paint
on a wall, God smiles, imagining
the day when they can all get together.

God's Springtime Chores

In May God gardens
piping prayers of the people
in through his ear buds

Dancing God

In the summer, God gets invited to parties. The Greek gods are hosting their annual drag show and anyway it's hot out. So, God goes again to his ex-wife's wardrobe, pulls out the lightest-weight, most flowy dress He can find, and slips it over His head. It fits, feels good—like He could live in this dress. He sashays over to the mirror to check Himself out and He likes what he sees. When he arrives at the party, He gets hundreds of compliments. When it's God's turn to strut down the catwalk, Aphrodite plays the Garbage song, "Sex Is Not The Enemy." God blushes a little and plays it cool, snapping His fingers and bobbing to the beat until He hears the lyrics of the last verse, *but then there's God and doesn't God love everyone?* Suddenly He busts out his best dance moves and shimmies all the way down to the floor, His dress really swirling. The other gods explode with catcalls and applause. God hasn't felt this good in ages.

Anniversary Poem
For Don and Nancy

At this age
you never know.
At this age
you never.
At this age you love
more than ever
because you know how
to love better.
At any age
when you love
you never know.

We have seen our friends go,
our children grow.
Our home decor is retro.
My love and I we watch
the game holding hands
on this couch.

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