

Poem #1 –

Dirty Jokes

“You need to get a vibrator,” she says. She the straight-laced therapist, who is probably someone’s mom.

I bet she’s the kind of mom who bakes casseroles and sets curfews. I bet her kids are in advanced classes and play lacrosse.

Did I mention that’s a rich kid’s sport?

I start to laugh the type of laugh you make when someone says a dirty joke and you’re not really laughing at the humor, but more that the joke is *dirty*.

I remember the time that kid yelled: “suck my dick” at the top of his lungs and people were stunned.

The whole bus became silent, even the kids at the back of the bus stopped listening to *Eminem*, because this was real life and not some guy who says “dick” so many times that you no longer notice it in his songs.

I laughed then, because the situation was awkward and the kid actually said the “word” out loud, while we kept it in like so many other things.

I mention my plan to not have sex, or date for a year.

She says that’s unrealistic.

She doesn’t know my past.

The straight-laced woman tells me that only when I learn to pleasure myself can I receive real pleasure from men.

The thing is, I can’t.

I’d much rather have a man give me false validation than an object that hums.

Although, that object can’t tell you later that he’s not looking for a relationship, or it’s only sex.

I try to explain my inabilities to her, but this is my first time meeting her and sex is something that you don’t talk about.

I blush and say, “that’s empowering.”

I start to think about sin.

I’ve never been able to get past that one church service where boys and girls sat on opposite sides of the church. We received “True Love Waits” rings and recited an oath printed in Times New Roman dark against the pure white sheet.

I remember mouthing those words, but in my mind I was saying: *God forgive me*.

Poem #2-

Basketball

“You’ve been raped.”

I laugh, which isn’t what the therapist is expecting.

I know she wants this to be one of *those* moments.

Perhaps, this will be the one weak spot in my brain’s functioning.

Perhaps, I’ll be cured of whatever makes me sad all the time.

Chemicals really aren’t answers.

“You really were raped,” she repeats.

Because maybe with emphasis I’ll react normally,

But she doesn’t understand that I’ve moved on from it.

I mean I was twelve.

That memory is stored in the forgetful realm of childhood.

It rests quietly beside the memory of my grandmother’s voice,

Which even today I can’t remember.

“I really wasn’t.”

I laugh again.

I mean I was twelve and old enough to say *no*.

I mean that’s the magical word you’re supposed to say when in a sexual situation you don’t want
to be in.

Just say “no” kids.

This happened after the presentation in the auditorium where we all sat cross legged on the gym
floor, which sometimes doubled as a basketball court.

I played basketball on that court.

“I wasn’t raped,” I say again.

Because maybe with emphasis she’ll understand that I was twelve.

I knew how to say no to things:

Like continuing basketball.

“He was in his twenties,” she says with laughter in her voice.
It’s always different when someone turns around and tries to joke on your joke.
It makes me angry.
“How did you feel afterwards?” she asks.
I felt nothing.
I remember the walk home from the sleepover.
I remember thinking that the flipflops I wore were digging into my feet.
I remember wondering what time the pool was opening that day.
I remember taking a shower and wondering how I got pink stuff on my hand.
I tell her I felt fine.

Poem #3-

Cheese, Two for Five

The cheese you liked is on sale this week.
I rung it up countless times today.
I would search for it among the soup cans, cereal boxes, and bags of salad.
I’d see it and think of you-
How you changed me into a lover of that sour cheese.
That, and the tart taste of strawberries.
It’s been two years since I took those two pills.
That left me only twenty-five minutes to say goodbye.
I remember writhing in pain on my bedroom floor clutching my stomach.
I felt the pain of my body pushing you out and I would look down expecting to see a head.
I imagine all that pain was your strength.
It was your fight.
In the end, you were just blood.
I still sleep in that bedroom.
Sometimes, I find myself staring at that spot, as if it were some scene of some great historical
crime.

“This is where it happened?” I’d ask the tour guide.

“Yes, that very spot,” he’d reply.

There are things and people that I still cannot bear:

Like the blue dress I wore that day,

Or, the pregnant housewife who came through my line.

She told me she craved carrot cake and just “had to have it.”

I wondered if she craved sour cheese and strawberries too.

Poem #4-

My Mother, Poseidon

My mother is drowning.

I hear her at night as I’m lying in bed.

Across the thin wall where our beds lay back to back,

She is gasping for air.

Her coughs carry like whispers through the wall.

I imagine the muted tones to be conversations between her and my father.

The loud moments where her coughing is more like a howl is my father’s voice,

While my mother’s is the gentle wheeze that follows.

Although my mother is not gentle;

She is a deli counter in New Jersey-

Loud and demanding.

It is not a mother’s voice.

She is both Boudicca riding into battle and Boudicca whispering, “I love you,” to her daughters.

The coughs come again, this time in a series of three.

Each one is louder than the other.

The bed squeaks from the force.

I wait to hear movement as she reaches for a tissue,

But all the work is just for show at night.

It’s only in the morning when everything arises that her body begins to purge.

Like a song, her coughs carry a predictable pattern that is amplified by the acoustics in the shower:

Hack, cough, spit,

Hack, cough, spit.

I imagine her as a goldfish flailing on the floor.

Except, it's not the lack of water killing her,

But the mucus her own body is producing.

I hate the comparison of her to a fish.

It makes her vulnerable.

All my life she has been Poseidon, master of the cycle of good and bad times that came in waves.

She could conquer anything.

But she is only human.

Poem #5-

Fish Tanks

There's something comforting about fish tanks in doctors' offices.

Especially this one, with its bright pebbles and the tiger fish.

Not the other doctor though,

That one only has grey pebbles, one plastic algae, a closed treasure chest, and one large yellow fish.

It does have a "Do Not Tap" sign though.

I think the large yellow fish needs a tap.

He always moves around the tank as if lost.

If I tap will it suddenly realize it's in a waiting room?

Man, to be stuck in a waiting room while stuck in a tank.

Should I point out the irony to it?

I read once it's not true that fish only remember up to three seconds-

They really can remember up to five months.

I've never had a fish live that long.

I'll let it keep searching.

This office doesn't seem to mind if you tap.

Just don't touch the ivy plant by the window.

I wonder if they worry about handprints?

The man behind me is getting loud.

He tells his aide he wants to go home.

She tells him to calm down.

"Don't overreact, or they'll keep you longer," John told me after I got mad that the nurse
wouldn't give me Tylenol.

"They're keeping Rose an extra day because she sang. They think she's still manic," he
whispers.

The man is crying now.

No one goes near the fish tank.

There's nothing to see when we've all been there.

The only difference is this tank is more colorful.