

# Shotgun

*for Julie*

My fourteen years shot-  
gun to your pilot sixteen,  
you at the wheel of your

1988 Monte Carlo—  
a machine made of muscle, bright  
orange with black

racing stripes. You'd floor it  
and the works that moved  
its broad-shouldered body would sing—

every window down.  
And past your grown-up hands,  
their red nails and soft lines,

those half-moons singed  
on the dash: scars  
of fallen ash from what

was not addiction,  
not yet. You wore cigarettes like blush  
or night — your birthright as

the beautiful one. The spark,  
the burn, the engine  
scent of each exhausted

stub. The thin veil  
of smoke a special effect  
that set your blonde hair

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aflame, framing your sharp jawline,  
your unspeakably full lips.  
That careless flick of your wrist high-

of your wrist high-  
wayward — getting rid of the  
evidence without

a thought, easy as  
a seasoned killer just in  
from an everyday murder, satisfied,

no trophy needed, knowing  
the joy of coming  
away from it clean.

## Her Joy of Cooking

kept finding its way out of boxes tagged for donation, insisting on its legacy like a grimoire that had outlived its witch. So in the end my sister and I resigned ourselves to keeping the book—its notes and clippings, the chicken-scratch on onion-skin pages, the stray potato peelings, a blood-flecked recipe for *czarina*. When you touch it you don't come away clean; its pages are sticky with the rough topography of dirty hands on holidays, the dry crust of all that we will never replicate, crumbs of history wedged into the spine.

You can almost taste it: the scent rising from age-ashened pages, a thin fragrance of decomposition and clove.

# Kitchen Histories

O good bread,  
when it is given to guests  
with salt and good will!

—*Wespazjan Kochowski*

At the kitchen sink my grandmother would suck meat from the turkey's boiled neck,  
then turn again to her work—cleaning the headless bird, patting it dry, pulling the legs down and back.  
She'd take a length of twine, cinch it in her bared teeth, and fasten together the spindly wings.  
Irreverent to recipes she would dash and pinch, season to taste. She measured with her eyes.  
She would dig her fingers in for the gizzard—taking care to waste no part of the body—  
then scrub her hands clean, wringing them, rubbing the goose-flesh skin.

I remember the first time you pressed your skin to my skin.  
You took off my glasses, then yours, freed my hair and touched my neck.  
You kissed me there. I was thin. The hard floor of your mother's kitchen bruised my back,  
but in the din of it all we didn't care. My sharp shoulder blades fanned out like wings.  
You opened my thighs and spoke softly, in Spanish. I didn't understand. I just closed my eyes,  
pressed my hand flat on the terracotta tile, and tasted the salt of your body on my body.

*Chiles mexicanos* range in color, strength, flavor, size, length, and shape of body;  
the *chilhuacle negro* is broad-shouldered with sweet heat and slick black skin,  
while the *casabel*, or “little rattle,” is brown and dry, with thin skin and a narrow neck.  
The thick-fleshed, heart-shaped *poblano* is best “sweated:” oiled, salted, then roasted front and back,  
carefully, over low heat. *Arte de la cocina*: Red-hot peppers and the fire-fighting rice that waits in the wings—  
ready to play its part in the passion, to soothe the smiles that burn below bright, tearing eyes.

Near the end, your mother couldn't eat. So small in her big kitchen, she'd sit through dinner, closing her eyes,  
fed by the nearness of the living. By then she'd lost her strength, and the color had gone from her skin.  
Now all the things your mind keeps buried are exhumed by restless senses: the smell of death—her body  
wasting through too-sweet perfume. The sound of her last rattling breath and the sick crack of her neck  
when you took her empty body, pulling it from the bed. Her head—still heavy—rolling, snapping back.  
Verses written in cursive scars that showed when her robe slipped—a silk flap on either side, slack as broken wings.

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On the last evening of her life, my grandmother ate a small order of White Fence Farm chicken wings and an enormous piece of chocolate cake. A true product of *kuchnia polska*, in my grandmother's eyes a balanced diet was salty, sour, sweet, and rich. *Kielbasa*, pickled herring, cherry *pierogi*. Fresh cream. The body, she said, was not built for food with too much heat. "Chilly," she'd say, "gives such a flush to the skin." I remembered this at her wake. Her face was blushed, her lips lined with red. A high collar hid her pale neck. Her glasses had been removed for the viewing. Before they closed the casket, I put them back.

I light the stove to heat tortillas, while you lie still, peaceful, on your back.  
I almost forget that wars have been fought over our families' tables. Loach, snow bunting, waxwing—  
so much of the game is extinct. So much of the Deluge gleams in the potato's eye.  
So much is lost between the white flour of my North and the rich corn of your South, our continent a broken body.  
So we raise the dead with photographs. We hold down our fort, free and warm in the soft borders of our skin.  
When you wake we cry over onions, and laugh. We stir and steam. We take a bottle of good red wine by the neck.

Here I am, a baby clinging to my grandma's neck. There's you with your mother, a note in her hand on the back.  
We do this often—stay up late in the kitchen, looking through pictures.  
Cooking, talking, remembering. Kissing. I say you have her eyes.  
You say I have your body. We share histories that live beneath the skin.

# Mappa Mundi

The cartographer retires her slide rule,  
returns her sharp compass to its case,  
lets the legend of her face fade to lassitude  
and longitude. After all it was so long ago,  
that era when each fold held so much  
unclaimed territory—when beasts were slain,  
their coverings opened, their bleached skins readied  
for her cardinal directions. A time when as mistress  
of motion and scale she'd spun whole globes  
on her fingertips and contained all possible bodies  
of water in a single drop of Cerulean—  
her ageless composition radiant and complete  
in an eternity not yet held  
fast in the rag's rough grain.

# Place of Laughing Waters

*for Sandy*

*Rockaway Park, 2012*

I've decided to drain the ocean—to down  
it slowly, slurping the salt sea whole  
like a live oyster, fine shrapnel  
of roseate shell shirring my throat—  
empty as eau de vie, that voluptuous body  
of water. I'll wait until dusk, when the fatted  
sandbags stand shepherdless. I'll steal them  
away, claim them as mine, and stamp my brand  
on their backsides. Because, you see, I've decided  
to appeal my poor portion of history.  
I can't lay claim to the consommé of Jamaica  
Bay; I know the bodies that bob up and down there  
like pale potatoes are part of some other's  
starved story. I neither saved a soul  
nor needed rescuing myself. I did not  
dry drown, electrocute, drift away, or fray  
my left femoral artery fumbling  
for my gentle grandmother's wedding ring.  
No, the pain I knew was nothing in comparison  
to some. But even so, I will have my say.  
I dare deem that day mine because I dream  
still of wind, still wonder whether or not  
I'll ever be expected to evacuate the only  
home I've known again. I still hear sirens  
dampened by dull waves and obliterated dunes.  
I was lucky, but listen: I lived there, loved there,  
and when the ocean wore down the winding shore,  
I lost something there. When the tide went out,  
some pearl that had been working its way to the surface of me  
went out with it, caught in the undertow, still feels  
at sea.