

Grandmother

Damp heat rises from the grass.
I sing your name like conjugating a verb:
dolo, dolore, Dolores
until you say *Shush,*
It's not polite to call
me by my name.

By the wild grape orchard,
in the backyard,
we stretch out in the hammock
strung between two pines.
You read the Nancy comics aloud
from the Sunday *Greenville Times,*
while my eyes trace the illustrations.
Your fingers, filmed with cornbread
grease, stain the pages.

I squash a chubby bumble bee
in my fist and wipe
the brown smudge into the white
clover creeping through
the grass. I want you to say
I am brave, but you click
your tongue and shake your head.

My Last Spanking

After church, in my great grandma's dark oak bedroom, Dad helps me change. *Arms up* he orders and pulls the yellow dress with white lace collar over my head. One quick movement like he's peeling off a dried scab. He hands me a bright orange pair of shorts. I am seven, and stand in front of grandma's large mirror with my arms straight out. Long and thin, I pretend I am a little Jesus on the cross. Head tilted to the side. I poke out my white belly and giggle. *Dad, look I'm like one of those little starving babies in Africa.* He searches my miniature lime green suitcase for a t-shirt. *Hon, that's not nice.* I push out my belly farther. *But I do. See, little skinny arms and a big fat belly,* I say. He stops pushing around my clothes and looks at me in the mirror. *I said stop it.* But I'm feeling good and strong, stretching my arms as far as the will go, pushing my belly out as hard as I can. Again I tilt my head to the side. *Look, now I'm Jesus.* I am over his lap before I can back away or say sorry. The sound is dull, dampered by my shorts. My muscles flex, but I don't cry.

After, Dad leaves the room, his face the color of a cardinal. I stare into the mirror, puff out my belly, clench my fists, whisper *African baby.*

From Man to Man, 1973

Somewhere in the house
her bulldog-faced father
is angry. Not at her,
not yet, but at her sister
who's forgotten to wipe
speckles of toast crumbs
from the black and white
checkered counter top.
Her little brother
is sitting cross-legged
in front of the TV,
watching *Guns smoke*.
The cowboys shoot Indians
in varying shades of gray.

Her bedroom door is closed.
She stares into the mirror
of her chalk-white vanity,
parts her hair
down the middle, pulls
it into pigtails.
She braids each side into thick
ropes of oiled hemp. The black
hair against her milky face
and white linen shirt
make her think of Dorothy
before she discovers Oz.

Today is September,
she is engaged.
My husband she says over
and over. Quiet then loud,
mouthing the word *hus - band*
with exaggerated lips. Somewhere
in the house her father
yells at her mother
who is peeling the husks
off pale ears of corn.
She can't hear her mother's reply.

But the girl in the room
doesn't care. She's leaving soon
with a man, her husband.
It's not because he drives
a little orange motorcycle,
or has butter colored hair, longer than hers.
It has nothing to do with the burning
red zits along his jawline

that he fingers like braille,
each pimple pulsing,
ready to explode.
It's because he is a hurricane
that will breeze out of this town.
Just like her mother says,
He's going places.

From Man to Man, 2009

In the cream colored carpet,
asphalt-granite counter tops,
a house with no sounds,
she applies the thick
Darkest Dark Brown
to her coarse white roots.
The chemical smell sings
her nose hair, eyes swell.

She stares in the bathroom
mirror, large over the pearly
his-and-her sinks.
Her husband is at work.
His cell phone is off,
always gone someplace.
A husband with a saggy,
pale stomach. His hair fine
like thread, gray as ash. She waits.
Thirty minutes for the dye,
two hours until her husband
comes home. She stares

in the bathroom mirror
and whispers *thirty-six*
years. Somewhere
in the house, there is a photo
of a boy with butter colored
hair, cut shorter than hers,
in a black tuxedo and white
cake cream smeared on his face.
Somewhere in the house
there is a photo of her
in a wedding dress,
staring straight into the lens.

I Kiss Someone Else at the Party

From my desk I hear liquid dripping to the hard wood floor, steady and deliberate like a leaky faucet. The cat jumps off the bed as I scream, *no—goddammit!* You come upstairs as I'm yanking off the sheets, *she pissed on the bed*, I say. You shake your head; *let me get the baking soda*. The pee leaves the white mattress looking like a smoker's tooth. We sprinkle the Arm and Hammer over the stain. As the powder dries, it cakes and crumbles, but the stain is still there. I mix bleach and water in a spray bottle and douse the splotch. Every few hours I spray more and by night time the stain is almost gone. You rub my back, *good job, you can hardly tell*. Later that night neither of us can sleep. We both stare at the ceiling and listen to the fan whirl on low. I whisper, *I think I can still smell it*. In the darkness I see your head nod up and down, *yeah me too*.