

## HIDDEN MONSTERS

“Painted-On”

The balloon animal pops in my hands,  
and the children giggle.  
It was supposed to be a donkey,  
but I guess now I’m the ass,  
and so I move to my bag and pull out the rope,  
the one that never seems to end,  
much like this day.

I pull the rope up and up and up,  
as the crowd of five-year-olds  
does its usual oohing and ahing,  
and I do my usual silent sighing.  
It’s pretty disappointing  
that a never-ending rope  
is too long to make into a noose.

Next comes the juggling,  
and I think about how the kids  
have no idea that tennis balls  
are the easiest things in life to juggle.  
Despite this, the balls fall from my hands  
to the ground, prompting more  
unplanned laughs.

I actually like the card tricks,  
not just because they’re the finale,  
but because they make me feel like  
I am someone else.  
For a moment, I can ignore the  
red nose and pretend that I’m  
a magician.

As I leave the party,  
I see the child that had been missing,  
cowering in the bushes outside.  
I wave my white-gloved hand and  
smile with my painted-on lips.  
Imagine my surprise  
when he screams and runs inside.

A short car ride is all it takes  
To get me home and in front  
Of my mirror decorated in fingerprints  
And make-up stains.  
The red lips are rubbed away  
And the white face slides into the sink,  
And that funny monster turns out  
To just be me.

“Tinted”

The monster on the TV screen  
Was hiding under a bed, but  
The monster in my house was found  
Hiding in a kitchen cabinet,  
Behind some decorative plates  
And cob-webbed candlesticks  
That were bought and then forgotten,  
But perfect to block a bottle.

I faced my mom’s rose-tinted eyes  
And asked for a snack during the first  
Commercial break, wondering why  
She couldn’t quite keep her balance  
Walking to the pantry, and why  
Her voice was high and thin when she  
Asked me if I wanted crackers  
Or the fruit snacks we bought that day.

“Mommy, are you okay?” was my  
Reply to the pack of fruit snacks  
Dropped into my 8-year-old hands  
And “Ofcourse” was the slurred response,  
But my fingers shook as I popped  
The gummy stars into my mouth  
And I retreated back to the  
Safety of the movie monster  
That just returned to the TV.

Once she was settled on the couch,  
Nursing a Ben & Jerry’s pint,  
I grabbed the phone in the kitchen  
And sighed into the sound of my  
Dad’s voice from a few states away,  
Comforted as I described things  
He had already seen before.

But I didn’t get my answers  
Before I had to pass the phone  
To ice cream-stained fingers and lips  
That would argue “I’m fine” and tell  
Me to go take a bath, but I  
Bypassed the bathroom and instead  
Curled up in my bed without  
Checking for monsters underneath.

Her sharply sweet breathe whispering  
Goodnight in my ear kept me up  
Long enough to hear the TV  
Turn off and the cabinet close shut.

“Advocate”

A devil’s caught you.

You watch its forked tail and hear its forked tongue whisper words  
That slip through your ears and snake through your body,  
Returning to your mind where they settle and simmer,  
And where you let them twist your ego and crush your sense of sympathy  
As they inflate your already stubborn immaturity.

Your body is passive

As these words evaporate the present and the future,  
Leaving you stranded in the emptiness of the past,  
Where the atmosphere is bittersweet and suffocating  
And you can’t do anything but scratch at the blank walls surrounding you,  
Because you are locked out of your own life.

These words have

Stopped you and put you in reverse and set your clock backwards,  
Yet you still feel as if you’re running out of time,  
You’re spiraling towards the nothingness  
That we all experience before life begins, but the difference  
Is that, according to those words, you don’t get a rebirth.

You try to blame

The damn whispers for your emotional U-turn,  
Because everyone needs a scapegoat for their misery,  
But you find that those words came from your own forked tongue,  
Sliding out as you flicked your own forked tail and wondered  
Why you hate yourself so much.