

Poetry Collection: The God I Inherited From My Father

Learning Theory.....2

At the Airport.....4

At the Bar.....6

The Go-To-Sleepers.....8

Letter Writing.....9

Learning Theory

In learning theory, you must break it down,
tear a concept apart to understand—
Dissect the frog, unwind its innards,
peel the heart from the cavity of the ribs.

Then explain how the digestive tract works,
diagram the pumping of black frog blood.
Before you build a bicycle, take one apart,
see how that rusty chain will spin the wheel.

There was a cool night when Maggie trembled,
and fireflies flit from the tip of her cigarette,
We could hear the crescendo of laughter,
the click of a lighter as Dan took a hit.

The acid sting of cheap red wine—bottled, I hoped.
Maggie's tattoo, scrawled on her left rib.
Low cut shirt—halter top, showed it off.
She walked out, returned, stood in the door—

"Refill, anyone?"—yes, it's a bottle.
"Yes," I said, because Maggie pointed
its open fish mouth at my empty glass.
My shirt was not low enough, my body unmarked.

Later it will be, later my blouse will plunge
down the cotton draped canyon of my breasts.
Todd will offer me a glass of eighteen-dollar
red wine he says has a "velvety finish."

I'll try to taste it, to savor swigs while
jazz notes trickle from the bedroom speakers,
the same notes that Ben burned onto
twenty-two mixed CDs—a gift of sluggish brass beats.

Sluggish beats that repeat over and over, they repeat
like the way Todd's oak headboard pounded
against his acolyte-white walls as he finished—
he tasted salty, not velvety.

At twelve, I drank communion wine,
blood of Christ on a Monday in a closet

with Eric the acolyte, whose lips
scrunched against mine, barely moist.

Teeth beneath lips. "You seem happy today,"
my mother said when she picked me up.
I sat close-kneed in the back seat and I touched
the numb lips where I had felt kiss and wine, acid teeth.

"No," I responded. "Not happy."
The words were pulled from me, slow like churning taffy,
my head spinning in the back seat, my tongue
lying against my teeth like a wet sock.

Did you know that jazz makes me nauseous?
Or that I hate the taste of cheap red wine?
They say you must break it down to build it,
that you can only understand pieces

and how those pieces fit with other pieces
that make up a frog, that make up a bike.
For me it's the grunt of men with mono-syllabic names,
The brother who moved away and never came back,

Nights watching mother's heartbeat on a screen,
as regular as the ticking of a clock until it's not,
The five years I grew like a weed on a stranger's land—
White woman on an Indian Reservation—

The years when I tried Los Angeles and Phoenix,
cities that only let you breathe between stop signs,
where white people sip lattes on Indian land,
Where men make promises they won't keep,

and always Maggie, part-friend, part-phantom
A woman in my mind whom I will always trail behind,
Who drags me through wine bottles and decades,
Always I am not good enough if my drink is not full.

At the Airport

At the airport, I watch a woman fall.
Her foot snags the rug, her knees make a *thud*,
The men—Ford salesmen, brief case men,
I'll take the check-men, they rise to attention.

One runs after her—"Let me take your bag,"
he says, "Let me help you up." *Let me. Let me.*
When he returns he is a Vietnam veteran,
a *let-me-take-you-to-your-gate* medaler.

Her thighs are wide like *Is-that-you?* smiles,
She did not want his *let-me-let-me* help.
They label our feelings like swells on an ocean,
Second wave, third wave, storm's 'a coming,

My brother called me the watered down versions
of the names I call myself, *heathen, whore*.
I was the anvil and the hammer, beat myself
until the whole world around me split.

We shared the same soil but he grew towards heaven
and I grew like climbing ivy, to stand up straight
I needed men like a wall behind me.
He told me to dilute my woman-ness, to be less.

My brother was ashamed I let my sex define me,
but I was born with a thousand eyes upon me—
Will she have big tits? Nice hair? Deep throat?
I fucked too many men and became a slut,

Closed my legs and became militant.
Men squeeze my waist at the office, lick lips,
Call me names on the subway—*bitch, cunt*.
I want to be wanted but not when I don't.

The word *consent* like ice on a hot day,
It's there until it's not, it is not guaranteed.
I do not want you to walk me to my gate,
because *I fell* becomes *let me, let me*,

because my hurt knee becomes your story.
Men watch women who look like me on t.v. screens,

Women who take it up the ass and say *Jesus*,
Women like me with big tits and fuck-me lips.

My brother moved to places where the women
came with family trees like bound feet,
China, the Middle East, South Sudan,
Places where *home* kept women delicate.

My mother's heart broke when he didn't come back—
the monitors said so—but we both know
If I'd fucked a little less, worn a little more,
He never would have left, chose *hijabs*

over cut-offs and bikini bottoms.
Anvil and hammer, I hate the *let-me* men
who walk me to my gate, I hate myself
for my woman-ness and my fuck-me lips.

Perhaps if I had grown from a different seed,
The kind not shown on billboards and t.v. screens,
Perhaps I would not draw a man in at the office
But push away the one who taught me to read.

At the Bar

We used to use straws to
blow bubbles in milk.
Her ass looks like that.
It's made to jiggle to the beat,
it's made to be slapped.

Back when my age was fishtailing
between 18 and 22,
I had a body like that.
I danced as if I swallowed rhythm,
after four beers my tummy stayed flat.
She dances as if gazes were currency,
as if nothing matters but the negative space
that surrounds the shapes that make up
an ass, that make up a breast.

If I write a poem about perky tits
and high asses it would mean
that those things matter,
more than secondary degrees
and trips to Africa,
more than the man I love leaving
without looking backwards.

But those things do matter,
like border wars and drug lords,
abortion is murder and the first man
who fought bullets with hunger.
As long as degrees of freedom
are measured by how tolerant we are
of flies making their homes
on the crusts of our bread
and the moist triangles of our eyes,
the bodies of our enemies
are a weapon that can turn on itself
and the womb is upstaged by leather and lace.

My face is too Semitic for the prow of a ship
so I stand on the top deck and
forget that the water
swallows the bodies of women
whose skin is more wave than crest,

that the dreams of the drowned
are the fears of the grounded.
If bodies are warzones for
land mines and torture,
mine is far from the front line.

But still, the prayers of my mother
Remain locked in a cupboard,
Yahweh for a ring and a veil,
God is good, god is great's,
Now I lay me down to sleep's,
When I pray, I pray to the God
I inherited from my father.

Barukh atah Adonai, eloheinu,
I leave the bar to write a poem,
an ode to round asses and slim thighs
and the shared screens and magazines
that teach a woman how to dance.
We all read the same thing
and watched the same screen.
Lead us not into temptation,
Let wine taste of sour milk,
Let her tits remain unfelt.

The Go-to-Sleepers

I inherited sleeplessness and my chin from my father.
We both rise to pad the halls and wait for light.
When my father can't sleep
he builds swimming pools in his head
He tamps the ground, drivels the cement,
Rounds the corners and tiles the edges.
Me, I list the things I ate
and how much they'll make me weigh,
six almonds, a glass of milk,
the whole cake when I said I'd have one piece.
A florist's son and a foreman's daughter,
Each our own way of counting sheep.

Every night I tell myself,
If I don't pour another glass,
I could wake up and see the sun rise.
I could walk a straight line to the kitchen
without the room spinning.
But it helps me sleep,
Each glass another sheep.

All day my heart feels agitated,
Shuffling forward with a limping step,
little twitches suspended between beats
like the drag of a flat on an asphalt road.
This is my inheritance,
A pointed chin, a toss and turn,
a prayer that isn't heard,
a belief that one should hold their tongue,
a desire to spill it all,
a ritual that doesn't work.

Letter Writing

All through that white-washed winter
we exchanged letters—electronic ones—
stamped by the slam of a laptop cover.
We wrote of more-than-ordinary dreams,
at-work screw ups, tattoo blueprints,
just-viewed movies, blazed-through books
and nights we had too much to drink.
His words filled up the page, every day
a solid block like a brick.

My words were more like slats of a drain,
Strips of sentences split by space,

as if after every expression of thought
I paused to read and reread, questions

seeping through the cracks I left in the page.

He wrote as if he knew his words had weight.
Is it because he is older and in two years
my words will be adamant like his?
Or is it because he is a man, and I a woman,
His genetics threaded with words like threats,
Words with consonants that kick from the lips--
Small pox, colonize, militant, nuclear, veto,

Mine made up of gentle sounds and baby coos,
Cradle, suckle, swaddle, breast, marry, Mary, merry.

He, viewing space as the next frontier,
Me, afraid to think of all I do not know,
Afraid that at night the sky will grab me by the hair
And pull me up inside of it.

Me, writing poems that fall apart as you read them,
Inheriting the indecision of hips and thighs,

Should I eat the apple, or should I not?