

THE BRIDE AFLAME

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www.blacklawrence.com

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ISBN: 978-1-62557-710-8

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Published 2019 by Black Lawrence Press.

Printed in the United States.

For Rob.

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I. American Girl

Praise Poem for American Girls

Here's to scissors that clip split ends easily as ex-
 boyfriends, the one who died in college, the refugee
who crossed a blood-soaked Nile, but never could
 get over you. Cheers to his hibiscus tea, to strong
coffee and Kentucky bourbon. Daughters pulled deep
 into Ohioan corn, romances banished to backseats
and barstools. Here's to newlyweds two-stepping
 to the second line waving paper napkins with new names
printed in gold. Praise helicopters hovering over frozen
 lakes in Madison. Wide blades break the ice, a thick fog
of ozone trapping brides and wives. Boys toppled out
 of boats, girls pushed in, the surfacing bodies of all the kids
who couldn't swim. Praise black loops, lazy coils etched
 across 80 like dark hairs roping down a long white leg.
Praise snow clotting fat cataracts over the road. There is
 nothing for miles, only your hot breath unraveling a memory
of wet wool. Blonde girls in hoop skirts getting hitched
 in a barn, yellow hair glowing brighter than a burnished
brass sax in Memphis. Praise grandmothers who still pin
 laundry outside, their long fingers the brittle wax
of weeping candles. Fruit flies that fill the kitchen and keep
 you company nights he is away, his skin clapping
against the sweet country ribs of his ex. Praise the end
 of an excuse with an interrogative. Who? Honey,

praise you. Long legs. High arches. The body you never
used for ballet. Dinners you wasted and drinks
you couldn't finish. Praise your revolving hips: Hula hoop champ,
flip flops shaken loose in the grass. Your heady

lip gloss shines a Montana moon. Denim laced to fringe
over a fence during crowning for the Milk-Can Dinner
Queen. The silkscreened tee puckered across your chest:
Not All Tetons Are Grand Tetons But Mine Are.

Praise scrapyards and salvation. Briny bodies,
burrowing deep in flannel sheets. Bayou critters
boiled apple red and spread across announcements.
You can't help but suck each fatty head

like a river lusting after oars. That great bully!
Praise forgiveness. The mean girls, badass bitches
who stare you down and try to cut you with envy.
Praise Jesus. Praise Jehovah, and baby, praise them, too.

The City at the Bottom of the Lake

*Lake Wallenpaupack located in the Pocono Mountains is a manmade lake
built over a city.*

The summer Kelly went missing, they dragged
the lake. Entire rooms surfaced, a window

hung on great hooks, its shutters warped
like old hands, too painful to hold anything.

My first time fishing, I caught a roof
and pulled up rusted rain gutters.

Slate shingles swam straight into my net.

Its banks are littered with bottles,
pitched from sleepy pontoons.

There are no messages coiled inside them,
no undelivered love letters, only stray cigarette ends.

In Lenapi, Wallenpaupack means
the stream of swift and slow water,

but this dammed water does not move.

Slowly darkening from boat exhaust,
the water is black, even in daylight.

The years have obscured the city below.
Even the church steeple has disappeared.

My last time fishing, I snagged a lock
of hair, imagined her sleeping on a waterlogged

featherbed, reading delicate books
that disintegrate as she turns the pages,

and drinking from a glass that is always full.

Who Deserved This?

Little Sis moves into the Barbie Motor home. Floral bedding and a too-big sink.

She buys an Akita from a breeder. The dog comes with a wire cage. In her house,

loss wainscots the walls, grief in the chair rail, crown molding molds. Vacuum soggy cardboard,

mildewed rugs. In summer, the wallpaper curls. In storms, huddle under felled

trees. Little Sis burns her nose Rudolph red with vacation meth. Her skin peels

a translucent dime. She honeymoon in the backseat of a black Mustang. Everything

ends like Elvis, in the bathroom, where Sis births a soft clot the size of a baseball.

The tiny worm, still latching, glows hot-bellied and broken. Everyone tells

her you are not allowed to cry over this.

We all know tragedy finds only

those who catcall across waiting rooms
where umbilical cords loop, like a garland

of sausages clamped, still pulsing around
back rooms, waiting to be seared.

Sestina for Misogyny, Rape Culture, and Revolution

My English teacher put his fist to my chin as if to punch me in the face. He gave my jaw a nudge and said “you’re a doll, kid.” His name sounded like pervert but he taught me to love Hemingway, ran to keep his buttons closed, but still couldn’t know how you swim toward a waterspout spitting psalms. Getting raped is a storm like this, like getting in a car accident on the way to school.

Getting raped, pulled over in a parking lot on the way to school sprays a shrapnel injury, body splintered while eating cheese. No punch or scar, just a pathetic blur pooled across his backseat. Rape made me a Dali clock telling all the wrong times. Raggedy Anne doll, Peter Pan collar wilted like lily petals pried open. The nuns didn’t know, didn’t excuse my tardies. I closed my eyes while ladies shouted LOVE,

rich ladies in tennis skirts, lipstick blazing O mouths, O, LOVE O, while mine melted, a defeated sunset I had to reapply before school where I limped, a determined bird flopping half-winged in high grass, a know-it-all too afraid to raise her hand to ask, a gnawing appetite, a sucker punch spooling through my bones, a basement flood that claims my favorite doll.

Waking up to a rape is uncovering a mutation in your DNA. No rape

kit to understand how everything untwists, recoils, reshapes. Rape
comes back to get you. Big Bad knocking the doors of everyone you
love,
My husband's ex-girlfriend. My husband. My every sister. Rape is
dol-
phin slaughter you lament before all-you-can-eat sushi. High school
drop out returned to drop a second time. Rape is a punch
card Hallmark doesn't make. There are no congratulations, no
get well balloons, not for you whose name we aren't supposed to
know
but goes viral all the same. I sat with my legs open while unraped
ladies wiped sweat from pastel visors and went home to rum punch,
and daytime TV. Getting raped is a blinding eclipse, it's latex
gloves,
paperclips rubberbanded to a spitball slingshot in the school
bully's hand. Rape is a red mouth turning blue. Wives all dolled
up to sweat. He kept doing it until I was dead weight he needed a
dolly
to lift and gave up. That didn't stop the spectators. Don't you know
rape is a relationship and a sport? After rape, I came home to my
Playskool
dollhouse. Can you win rape? I was fourteen and a half, but after
the rape
I said fourteen. Rape is an apocalyptic antiwrinkle cream. After
rape, love
grows sticky. My skin spilled clear across the kitchen, tacky punch
I still can't stop touching as if by stepping and resteping I can
punch
the spot away. Our whistles fail us. Where are you when we need
you, love,
because right now your friend or mine, me or you, is somewhere
getting raped.

The Fire

My father took me to the Getty Museum to see “Nicolas and Alexandra: The Last Imperial Family of Tsarist Russia,” and behold bloodstained wallpaper preserved behind glass and the Tsarina’s severed finger, denuded of rings, that stitched rubies and ropes of pearls into her daughters’ dresses, to shield them from the firing squad. Some boy’s father took him to Chuck E. Cheese, peeled him from the ball pit, the boy’s greasy fingers still clutching a dented plastic sphere. He laid his sleeping son across the backseat and set the car on fire. Curled among plastic gas cans, the boy woke to his own screams. The camera from the bank across the parking lot captured the explosion in black and white: his father standing there, an unmoving witness, until he couldn’t watch anymore. At the trial, his father would say, “I tried to save him. Doesn’t that count for something?” The boy’s fingers melted, popsicles in summer. The sweet meringue of skin foamed, shedding soft ribbons like Kim Phuc. Naked, running from napalm, she tried to brush fire from her body, but wiped skin from her shoulder, thick scars, like breaking waves over her back. And my father, whose hands no longer fold for prayer, insists, “I wasn’t in the war,” because he spent the sixties stationed in Boston where he swaddled soldiers in Saran Wrap and watched them sweat in a climatic chamber, trying to recreate conditions of the jungle,

to cure the soldiers coming home with rashes caused by Agent Orange, while his brother crouched beneath heavy leaves, his finger poised, waiting for something to move. Alexandra, too, felt so guilty having passed the bleeding gene onto her son, though she'd been spared, she exhausted the royal surgeons and turned instead to wizarding Rasputin. Using his teeth to trace a fan of ghost feathers on a Thanksgiving turkey, that boy's empty hands look like a rayless sun.

But sometimes I can see what isn't there: my father's soft palms slipping into a leather glove for Red Sox weekends, Alexandra's finger, stitching a carapace of pearls, and some boy's father, his fingers splayed, waving to greet his son.

Against the Pavement

My father is an endless garbage man
who never sleeps. I kneel on rice and come
to him in tears, he says, We are meant to suffer
in this world. He has given birth to an orchestra
of daughters. Trumpets of starlight and clarinets
made of candy bars. At night, my father sings
of a sandman who will make my dreams
come true. His voice is a white sail that carries me
across the sea. He says, *Even sadness is a blemish.*
Sling back straps rub my heels raw. We swim in hotel
pools when no one is watching. My father's hand
pushes me under the water until my knees scrape
against the cement. I am the seventh pin in a seven-
ten split, still sucking it in. When I tell my father,
I am better, he believes I am healed. My father forgets
what it was like growing up. He is afraid
to touch me, my hot skin shaved and sanded.
I bathe in powdered milk and prayer, stripped
of cilia, still waiting to earn my weight in wings.

The ER Needs a Soda Counter

Highways vault over our hometown, like bead and wire toys
in the waiting room. It takes him longer and longer
to complete the crossword. Each week,
more white bricks surface on the page.

My father collected my teeth from beneath my pillow.
I do the same, plucking lost crowns and fallen bridges
from his sheets. Instead of quarters, I leave
glass marbles and newspaper boats.

We set sail on soda-fountain stools, spoon
foam from the egg cream sea, suck white smoke
from the geothermal vents in the ocean floor.
The end is a cup of separated whites, stiffening into soft peaks.

Something in his wrist glows in the dark, keeps
his bones together in Eel City, where vertebrates relocate
and chase bubbling columns south to warmer waters.
Finally, someone calls our name and takes him from me.

The beads clack along fixed tracks.
When I see him again, his skin more covered in liver spots,
I wonder if this is insides surfacing, his organs
seeping upward like dead fish as their bodies fill with gases.

I want to turn him into a zebrafish, train him
to regenerate a damaged heart, regress
to Chutes and Ladders scaffolding, then grow
new chambers—like an alarm—pulsing red with urgency.

Butcher

My uncle's wife leaves him,
says she can't take the smell,
the brine of blood, rust in water.
Her rotten womb. Twice a week
they burn the offal. We hold
our breath in tunnels, past
graveyards, suck sour air
at school. My uncle swears
nothing dies on the kill floor.
Eyes bounce across greasy
concrete. They pop beneath
work boots. Intestines coil
into vats, ropey snakes that slip
from gloves to slither
live across the bleeding floor.
No one eats chitlins
here. My uncle's wife made
her own soap from boiled wax.
When my mother won't
take me to the Piercing Pagoda
in the mall, my uncle heats
a needle, says *Don't move*.
It doesn't even bleed. My uncle
sleeps all summer
on our screened-in porch. He scrubs
until his skin bleeds. A rash of scabs
clog the drain. He is clean, but
not clean enough to bring back
a life, a tree where he can kiss
a girl and fill a carriage, enough
to keep a doe from the road.