

The Line

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By *Brian Sneed*

The Line

A Play and Poems by

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The Line

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Cast:

Sarah
Brigid

Setting:

The kitchen of a two-bedroom apartment in America, present.

Lights up. SARAH is sitting at a kitchen table downstage, reading a paperback copy of The Fellowship of the Ring. She reads a moment, looks to her watch, then back to her book. A beat, she looks at the bathroom door, then to her book, then to her watch. It is clear that she is very anxious. Finally:

SARAH

Well? *(beat)* Come on sweetheart, it's not the end of the world. It's natural. Billions of people have done it. *(beat)* Bridget? *(a pained moan comes from the other side of the door)* What is it, honey? You're going to be fine, just come into the kitchen. I'll fix you a Dirty Girlscout. *(another moan)* It isn't like your life is over. You can still drink. If we were in Ireland, you'd get a free Guinness anywhere you went. It's like an old custom or something. Mother nature knew what she was doing, *(beat)* Bridget? *(another moan)* Look, you can't stay in there all night, people have to pee! In fact, I have to pee. I have to pee right now, so get out! *(has crossed to the bathroom door, which is locked. She shakes the knob twice)* Bridget, open the door.

BRIGID

I can't

SARAH

What do you mean, you can't? Get off your ass and turn the knob.

BRIGID

I mean I can't

SARAH

Honey, I'm dying of suspense out here.

BRIGID

I don't care.

SARAH

Well it's my bathroom too and it's the only one we've got, so get out! *(beat)* Listen. Sweetheart, I'm your friend. I want to help you. A lot of people go through this. It's like one of those statistics, a hundred and fifty people every hour find out they're going to be a -*(is cut off by the largest moan yet)* If you let me come in and see it, I can at least-

BRIGID

I can't move.

SARAH

What do you mean, you can't move.

BRIGID

I can't move! If I leave the window, I'm going to throw up.

SARAH

You're sick?

BRIGID

I just happen to be very ill at ease at this present moment. I have dis-ease.

SARAH

What the hell does that mean?

BRIGID

It means I'm pissed off and depressed and want to be near the window because it means I have the option of jumping out of it.

SARAH

Brigid Lauren Strickland—!

BRIGID

You're not my mother.

SARAH

Let me in there this goddamned minute-

BRIGID

I was joking, Sarah. Jesus. Laugh. I need to laugh. I feel that if I don't laugh right now I'm going to crack down the center like a tree.

SARAH

So you're not thinking of throwing yourself out the window?

BRIGID

I might, if you don't tell me something funny in the next sixty seconds.

SARAH

Sixty seconds?

BRIGID

I'm counting! One Mississippi, two Mississippi, three Mississippi-

SARAH

I'm not a comedian, Bridge. I'm not even mildly funny. The funniest thing I ever did was writing "yes" when they asked my sex.

BRIGID

Seventeen-issippi, eighteen-issippi-

SARAH

But you skipped all those other ones.

BRIGID

Twenty-six-issippi, twenty-seven-ssippi-

SARAH

You're not even saying it right! You have to say the full thing: one mi-ssi-ssi-ppi.

BRIGID I

don't care! Forty-nine-issippi, fifty, fifty-one-issippi-

SARAH

Just hold on, I'll call somebody. They let you do that on TV, "call a friend".

BRIGID

In case you haven't noticed, this is life or death! Do you know what that means? It means my future depends on you finding the courage to pull the stick out of your ass. Funny, Sarah! Now!

SARAH

Okay! Something funny. Shit, shit, shit. What did I laugh at yesterday. I had to have laughed yesterday. Something. Shit! What was it! Something at work-

BRIGID

Fifty-nine-and-a-half-

SARAH

Alright, I got it! So there's this Pope and this Indian Chief. The Pope calls the Chief to invite him out to his place, his Holy Sanctum, and the Chief agrees to. So after saving up for a few weeks, selling rabbit skins or whatever, the Chief gets on the plane and flies to the Vatican. Once he gets there the Pope takes him on a tour and shows off his medieval relics, his old scriptures, tapestries, and they get to his office where there's a telephone that isn't plugged into anything. So the Chief asks, "what's that?", and the Pope says "it's my direct connection to God". The Chief asks to use it and, after an hour or so, is accosted by the Pope who apologizes but must ask for some payment. "It's a special call, long distance, very costly, you understand." So the Chief left him some feathers and incense and went back home.

BRIGID

I'm taking the screen out!

SARAH

So the Indian Chief invites the Pope to his home a few months later, and he shows up a week later. The Chief walks him through his camp, very modest, just a few teepees and a fire-pit and,

like the Pope, invited him into his Holy Teepee. They talked for a good while until the Pope noticed a phone in the corner much like his own. It was unplugged and didn't have a cord, also like his. "Oh that", the Chief said when he noticed him looking at it, "that's my direct connection to God". "Oh", the Pope said, "may I use it?" The Chief told him he could and after an hour or so, the Pope came up to him and said "I feel so sorry, I charged you when you used my connection, let me pay you some". But the Indian Chief turned to him and said, "don't worry. It's a local call." *(long beat)* Look, I told you I wasn't very funny, but you could at least show some appreciation. Bridge? *(beat)* Why do I care? It's not like it has anything to do with me, really. You know, some people don't even have friends to do this! They're all alone, *(beat)* You can be so damn selfish sometimes! *(long beat, sits down, picks up book and reads it for a four count before putting it down. She sighs. Then, eyes suddenly wide, she turns to the door)* Brigid. Brigid! *(she jumps up)*

BRIGID

(small) I'm here.

SARAH

Jesus Christ!

BRIGID

I'm sorry.

SARAH

My god, Bridge. Do you know people die from jumping out of their windows? You want to become a statistic?

BRIGID

I'm sorry.

SARAH

If I was your mother I'd slap you.

BRIGID

I read somewhere that monkeys laugh to show distress. I think I just became a believer.

SARAH

A believer.

BRIGID

We definitely came from monkeys.

SARAH

That's really great. I'm going to my room.

BRIGID

Why?

SARAH

I promised I'd read *The Lord of the Rings* to my baby one day. Considering my luck in that department, I figured it was now or never. I want to know what happens to Frodo. *(goes to leave)*

BRIGID

(loudly, scream) I'm just not ready for this!

SARAH

(freezes in her tracks. Beat.) What? What are you talking about? Don't joke about this. Did you...

BRIGID unlocks the bathroom door and enters stage. She walks slow and numb, like someone trying not to vomit. She sits in a downstage kitchen chair facing the audience. Quietly, SARAH crosses to the other side of the table.

SARAH

(reaching for her hand) I know it's sudden. But that's what everyone says. There's no "right time". I mean, you can't expect it to happen when you want it to.

BRIGID

Having a steady job first would be nice.

SARAH

My grandmother didn't have a steady job.

BRIGID

Your grandmother had a pilot's salary coming in.

SARAH

What about David?

BRIGID

Who knows?

SARAH

He loves you. He wouldn't do that. And besides, even if he did run, you won't be on your own. I'm sure your mom would help.

BRIGID

My mom called me a slut the first time she saw me kiss someone. I was nineteen!

SARAH

You could apply for programs. There's always government support.

BRIGID

Living off welfare at twenty-three wasn't exactly what I had in mind.

SARAH

Look, if nothing else you could look for a job that gives paid vacation. You have time. I mean, nine months isn't forever, but it isn't next week either.

BRIGID

They say you can't work after the seventh.

SARAH

I hear in France they give you three thousand dollars when you have a kid, and two hundred a month until they're twenty-one—

BRIGID

Goddamnit Sarah, we aren't in fucking France, alright? We aren't in France and we aren't in Ireland. How do you know all that shit anyway?

SARAH

Because, unlike you, I like to be deliberate and well-informed with my decision-making.

BRIGID

Decision-making? You call getting tipsy with a man whose stamina happens to drop below sea level after he's had a fifth of bourbon decision-making?

SARAH

You're going to be fine.

BRIGID

I'm not ready for this.

SARAH

(beat. New tactic) So. Do you have any names?

BRIGID

(stunned) What?

SARAH

For your baby. What are you going to name it?

BRIGID

Oh my god.

SARAH

I've had them picked since I was twelve. I couldn't wait until I had a baby. I'll tell you if you promise you won't steal them.

BRIGID

(out of breath) I think I can promise that.

SARAH

What do you think of the name Edgar. Sounds regal, doesn't it? I always thought I would name my son Edgar or Luke. I like names that are different but not too far out there, you know what I mean? But I don't think I could handle Bob or John either.

BRIGID

Sarah, I really don't think I can talk about this right now.

SARAH

Caleb is another good one. Not that I agree with the whole naming your child after a Biblical figure hype. I mean, It's not like I have any Hebrew roots. You might as well name them Adolf or Akira or something.

BRIGID

Sarah-

SARAH

What about a Tolkien name? I mean, they're both big books, both classics even. That's it! My son will be Bilbo! Bilbo Edgar Thompson- or, whatever his last name is. You don't think they'll pick on him in school, do you?

BRIGID

Sarah! Please, for Christ's sake, stop talking! Please. Just for a minute. I need to process.

SARAH

Sorry, *(beat. Her suppressed need to talk is comical)* Just trying to help, *(beat)* I just thought, if I was pregnant, I'd want someone to talk to about it. But that's okay, *(beat)* Have it your way. *(beat)* Just trying to help, *(long beat, then:)* I mean, you're going to have to deal with it some day.

BRIGID

I know that, just not right now! Please. I just need to let it sink in. Slowly! It's like getting into a very cold lake. I want to take it inch by inch.

SARAH

I always find it best to just jump in and get it over with.

BRIGID

Sarah!

SARAH

Alright!

Awkward beat. BRIGID is attempting deep breathing techniques, which eventually evolve to her holding her hands in meditation position and humming a wavering "OM".

Meanwhile SARAH has crossed to the kitchen bar and started loudly munching pretzels. She thinks a moment, then:

SARAH

So what do you think of Courtney?

BRIGID

What?

SARAH

If it's a girl. I like the name Courtney. Of course it could be because I knew a Courtney I really liked, back in high school. That's the problem with associations, everyone has different. Which is why I want a good, neutral name.

BRIGID

(aghast) Look. It's obvious that you've thought about this. A lot. But I haven't. I've never even imagined-

SARAH

Not once?

BRIGID

No! I'm twenty-three!

SARAH

So what? My grandmother was sixteen when she had my mom.

BRIGID

Times change! Look at Shakespeare! Juliet was like fourteen when she got knocked up. And that was, what, five thousand years ago?

SARAH

Four hundred.

BRIGID

The point is, you can't be a mother when you're fourteen. You can't. Or when you're sixteen. You haven't even lived yet really. You're still a kid. I'm twenty-three and I'm still a kid.

SARAH

All I'm saying is it's possible, that's all.

BRIGID

For people like you, maybe.

SARAH

And what's that supposed to mean?

BRIGID

It means that there's two kinds of people in the world: those who want kids and those who don't. Not everyone wants to live all quiet and domestic like you and your grandmother.

SARAH

What's wrong with domestic?

BRIGID

(sigh, forced calm) Nothing. Nothing's wrong with it. I don't want to fight. I'm just a little overwhelmed by the enormosity of the situation at the current moment. Please. Can't you understand?

SARAH

(beat) I guess it's natural.

BRIGID

Thanks.

SARAH

What do you want me to do?

BRIGID

I don't know, show some sympathy maybe? Put yourself in my shoes and try to imagine what it's like having your entire world turned upside down over a stupid case of premature ejaculation!

SARAH

I'm sorry. I can't.

BRIGID

You can't.

SARAH

No.

BRIGID

We're talking about the girl who let the recycling get seven feet tall before taking it out. We're talking I had to steal toilet paper from work last time it was your turn, because you spaced out and overdrew your bank account on lingerie. You're not exactly Ms. Responsibility.

SARAH

What I mean is that I can't imagine the news of a baby affecting me unpleasantly. At least not the way it's affecting you. It's not the plague, Brigid.

BRIGID

Did I say it was the goddamned plague? Don't put words in my mouth!

SARAH

A cold lake? Inch-by-inch? Face it, you're not exactly thrilled.

BRIGID

And what would you suggest, Oh Mistress of Correct Decisions!

SARAH

Celebrate! Rejoice, Bridge, you're pregnant! You're going to experience the miracle of birth! Life is going to push itself like a ripe pumpkin out of your cooch. You'll be joining the ranks of motherhood, connected to all those women who have made great doors out of their own skin. Just think about it. You're giving the whole world to one little boy—

BRIGID

Or girl, *(beat)* What if I don't want to.

SARAH

What are you talking about?

BRIGID

I'm saying, what if I'm not sure "this world" is something I want to give someone.

SARAH

Are you kidding? You're going to give him mountains. You're going to give him sunlight and tiramisu. Downtown San Francisco!

BRIGID

I'd be giving her war. Gang violence. Global warming.

SARAH

You're going to give him Beethoven. The feeling of walking barefoot on the beach.

BRIGID

You mean I'll be giving her Superfund sites. Polluted drinking water!

SARAH

You'd be giving him love.

BRIGID

I'll give her a one in three chance she'll be raped before she's thirty. I mean, Jesus Christ Sarah-

SARAH

What you're giving her is a chance to change the world. She could be the first female president, for all we know. Che Guevara in a miniskirt. Who's to say you have any right over what she does or does not experience.

BRIGID

Roe vs. Wade, last time I checked. Besides, I can't control what she'll be, even if I do have her.

SARAH

(beat) But you said, *(beat)* The test was positive, wasn't it? There was the line-

BRIGID

I didn't look.

SARAH

What?

BRIGID

I was scared, I didn't look.

SARAH

You mean you didn't even—!

BRIGID

I couldn't handle it! I haven't even considered the possibility of being pregnant until yesterday. I couldn't even sleep last night. I just laid there for hours, staring at my old Labyrinth poster to keep from thinking about it. This is the first time I haven't bled.

SARAH

How many days has it been?

BRIGID

(small) Three

SARAH

Three days! You're telling me your period is three days off, and you're acting like this?

BRIGID

What part of 'inch by inch' didn't you get? It's been a month. It's not coming, I can feel it.

SARAH

Do you know what the chances are you're just late? Jesus Christ Bridge, we've been at each other's throats and we don't even know anything yet? *(beat)* Well, what are you waiting for?

BRIGID

What do you mean?

SARAH

The bathroom! Get in there and look at the results.

BRIGID

I can't.

SARAH

Take some responsibility for your actions and get in there.

BRIGID

Sarah-

SARAH

Now! If you don't I'll go look and tell you if you're pregnant or not.

BRIGID

Okay! Okay. I'm going. See me? I'm going to the bathroom. You don't have to bitch, *(beat)* I just needed to let it sink in. I'm ready now. *(breathes deep, stiffly)* I'm ready. I accept. I'm strong, *(begins to chant "OMNAMAHSHIVAYA ". It's obvious she does this often to calm down, and should be incredibly comical. SARAH makes for the door)* Alright! *(she enters and slams it behind her.)*

SARAH returns to sitting at the table, begins reading. The stage picture is identical to the play's opening. A beat, then an enormous moan comes from behind the door. SARAH drops the book.

BRIGID

Why does this have to happen to me! I haven't done anything bad to anyone. I'm a good person!

SARAH

It's not a punishment.

BRIGID

Yes it is! God hates us.

SARAH

Don't be ridiculous.

BRIGID

He does. He hates us and he hates sex. Why can't we just do what we want? It's our bodies.

SARAH

Do you want some tea? I'm putting the kettle on.

BRIGID

I can't do this, I just can't!

SARAH

You chose to play the game.

BRIGID

What?

SARAH

I said you're going to be a great mother.

A scream comes from behind the door.

SARAH

How do you know if you don't try? It could be your calling.

BRIGID

I don't even know how to knit!

SARAH

I'll teach you how to knit. I'll teach you how to make blankets and sweaters and hats, and little toboggans to keep their ears warm-

BRIGID

I'll be a terrible mother.

SARAH

No you won't, you don't know that.

BRIGID

Why couldn't they have picked someone else? There have to be people more qualified.

SARAH

Well, you *could* give it somebody else.

BRIGID

What?

SARAH

Someone more qualified. There's plenty of people who'd love to have your baby.

BRIGID

You mean, give my baby away?

SARAH

Well, yes.

BRIGID

Sarah, what the hell are you talking about?

SARAH

It's called adoption, it happens all the time. People aren't ready to raise a kid, so they give it to someone who is.

BRIGID

My baby is *not* going to end up in some stranger's house! You don't know what people do. They could train her to be a terrorist or a televangelist.

SARAH

Would you come out so I don't have to talk to you through a goddamned door?

BRIGID

I can't do this!

SARAH

Stop being a baby. If it's happened to you then you might as well accept it.

BRIGID

There has to be a way out. It can't be unfair like this.

Life isn't fair!

SARAH

Shut up!

BRIGID

Those tests are like 99.9% correct. You could take ten of them, they'll all say the same thing.

SARAH

I can't even bring myself to look at this one, what would I do with ten?

BRIGID

What!

SARAH

Please, put yourself in my place.

BRIGID

Brigid, open the door right now.

SARAH

It's my baby, not yours!

BRIGID

Open the door!

SARAH

I'm going to throw up!

BRIGID

Then throw up. Brigid, if you don't come out in five seconds, I'm going to kick this door down.

SARAH

No you won't! The deposit-

BRIGID

Does it sound to you like I give a damn about the deposit? Five Mississippi!

SARAH

You're insane!

BRIGID

Four Mississippi!

SARAH

BRIGID

It's my choice goddamnit! Haven't you heard of Roe vs. Wade?

SARAH

You mention abortion one more time in this apartment, I'll cut out your tongue with the steak knife. Three Mississippi!

BRIGID

You're crazy. Haven't we talked about this?

SARAH

Evidently not. Two Mississippi!

BRIGID

Now I believe all those stories about pro-life bitches blowing up clinics. They're all like you.

SARAH

One!

BRIGID

Okay! Okay! I'm coming out! Just get away from the door.

SARAH

Brigid— !

BRIGID

Get away! Get away and I'll come out.

SARAH

Fine, I'm away.

BRIGID

Farther!

SARAH

(looks around, takes a baby step, and speaks quieter with a hand muffling her mouth) Okay, I'm far.

BRIGID

I can see your feet from beneath the door! Get behind the table!

SARAH

Alright!

SARAH backs up behind the table ready to pounce. The door unlocks and BRIGID slowly creeps out, still holding the door. What follows is a sort of step-and-stop tableaux where the girls intently watch each other as they move, and stop on a dime. SARAH makes for the door, BRIGID shuts the door and rushes to the kitchen area. Triumphantlly, SARAH tries the door. It is locked. Look of outrage, tries again. BRIGID eats crackers.

SARAH

Oh that's just brilliant. Fucking genius! Tell me, since I'm sure you carefully thought this out as usual- what are we supposed to do if we have to pee?

BRIGID

Use the sink. That is, if it weren't full of your dirty dishes.

SARAH

Oh. I'm supposed to just squat over the counter?

BRIGID

(shrugs, still munching) It'll give you incentive to clean your dishes.

SARAH

You're walking a very, very tight rope.

BRIGID

Since you haven't answered me yet from the first time I asked you: why do you care? What's it to you whether I'm pregnant or not.

SARAH

A baby doesn't just belong to you, it belongs to the entire world.

BRIGID Is

that it? I wonder.

Intense eye contact, then SARAH moves to the window. She has one leg out of it before BRIGID, who has dropped the box of crackers, can react.

BRIGID

What are you doing?

SARAH

What does it look like I'm doing!

BRIGID

Committing suicide.

SARAH

You've already mentioned abortion. Don't think two people are going to die over this.

BRIGID

Sarah, stop being self-righteous and tell me what the hell you're doing.

SARAH

There's a window in the bathroom. *(She vanishes outside the window)*

BRIGID

Sarah, I'm calling the police! You can't just throw yourself out the window. You're not Catwoman. *(as she crosses to the window)* Sarah, this isn't funny! Sarah! *(turns from window)* She's insane.

Long beat, where-in BRIGID pulls the pregnancy test out of her pocket, forcibly looking away from it. She opens a cabinet on the counter labeled "SNACKS" and puts it inside as the sound of breaking glass is heard from the bathroom. BRIGID rushes to the door.

BRIGID

Sarah!

SARAH

(door swings open and she emerges) Where is it?!

BRIGID

Are you okay?

SARAH

The pregnancy test!

BRIGID

You're bleeding!

SARAH

I checked the cabinets! Brigid, what did you do with the pregnancy test?

BRIGID

What did you do to your foot?

SARAH

My foot.

BRIGID

Your ankle. It's bleeding all over the floor.

SARAH

One of the storm shutters broke, it fell on my ankle when I climbed through. But that's not important!

BRIGID

Get over here. I'm sitting you down at the table.

SARAH

Brigid!

BRIGID

Cooperate! Now lean on my shoulder.

SARAH

Not until you tell me what you did with the test.

BRIGID

I threw it out the window. It doesn't matter. Now, come over to the table.

SARAH

What about the other one! They come with two tests in them. Where's the other one?

BRIGID

I don't know, it's in my car or something.

SARAH

Go get it! Get it and take it right now. I want to be in the room this time!

BRIGID

Jesus Christ Sarah, you're asking me to pee right in front of you.

SARAH

I don't care!

BRIGID

What you're going to do is come with me to the table. Do you want it to get infected?

Infected? SARAH

Your foot! BRIGID

Yes, my foot. I hurt it coming through the window. SARAH

I know that, now come sit down. BRIGID

(obeying) Is it bad? SARAH

I can't tell yet. Sit. Now put your foot up on the table. BRIGID

It hurts. SARAH

Let me get the overhead. BRIGID

She moves to the counter and turns an unseen dimmer switch. Lights increase.

There. Don't put any weight on it, just stay in the chair. BRIGID

What are you doing? SARAH

Getting the first aid kit. BRIGID

(beat) That wasn't very smart, was it? SARAH

You're a fucking idiot. Do you know how easy it would have been to slip? Fifty feet onto solid pavement won't do wonders for your figure. BRIGID

(*laugh*) What a ride.

SARAH

Are you kidding?

BRIGID

That was the most fun I've had in months.

SARAH

Nearly losing your life over a line on a pregnancy test?

BRIGID

Yes

SARAH

Well, it's something you can tell your grandkids, if you have any,

BRIGID

(*disproportionably shocked*) Did you actually just say that?

SARAH

I'm sorry, I wasn't thinking. I meant if you live to have grand kids, meaning you won't if you keep pulling shit like this. I didn't mean it like that. I know you're sensitive about your—

BRIGID

Shut up. It's alright, I know you didn't mean it.

SARAH

I'd be sensitive about it too, and I don't even want kids—

BRIGID

I said alright, Brigid.

SARAH

(*ignoring*) You see, the blood's already stopped. This might hurt some.

BRIGID

What is it?

SARAH

It's good for you.

BRIGID

Rubbing alcohol?

SARAH

BRIGID

Just sit still.

SARAH

I remember that stuff from when I was a kid. I'd get these wicked skid knees about once a week. We had a paved driveway— Ow!

BRIGID

Keep talking. It'll keep your mind off the pain.

SARAH

So nurturing already, *(another dose)* Shit!

BRIGID

You deserve it.

SARAH

I just get so passionate about the subject.

BRIGID

Infertility?

SARAH

No, abortion. You know the story about my mom.

BRIGID

I don't remember.

SARAH

About how she conceived me. She was young, in her early-twenties I think. Actually, she was twenty-three, just like you. What a coincidence.

BRIGID

Imagine that.

SARAH

It was back in her wild, traveling days. She left home when she was twenty and just traveled around, with nothing but her backpack and her guitar. Staying on a different couch every night, not knowing what the next day would be like, just living eternally in the moment. She was staying with a girlfriend one night and there was a party going on and, to put it simply, she got drunk and ended up sleeping with this guy. Never knew him, and never saw him again, and boom. Nine months later I come screaming leg-first out of her and her life changes forever. My mother was reckless, she loved living that way, and was terrified when she found out she was carrying me. But abortion was against her beliefs.

BRIGID

What was she, a Southern Baptist?

SARAH

Radical communist Pagan, actually.

BRIGID

Well, you know those Pagans.

SARAH

The point is, she had every opportunity to abort me, but didn't. If she'd been selfish, I wouldn't be here.

BRIGID

You don't know that.

SARAH

Yes I do. It was then or never. Don't pull that "it'll come back to me later" bullshit. When it's dead, it's dead. Ow!

BRIGID

There, you're done.

SARAH

She said I was good for her, Bridge. She said I gave her purpose. I grounded her and made her more responsible. Within two years she was living on a farm with her soul mate and growing tomatoes.

BRIGID

The American Dream.

SARAH

Look, you don't know everything. People always say "but I wanted to do this first, or I wanted to go here". You don't know that. The people who say, "I wanted to do so much with my life before I had a kid": guess what! *This* is your life!

BRIGID

What's wrong with making plans?

SARAH

Nothing, if you can accept it when the plan doesn't work.

BRIGID

If only it wasn't happening now. Three years from now, maybe, but not now.

SARAH
(beat) What are you doing?

BRIGID
Getting on the internet.

SARAH
Why?

BRIGID
I want some advice.

SARAH
What, from some stranger you don't even know? I just gave you advice!

BRIGID
Sit still. If you try to walk the bandage will break.

SARAH
Did you at least look at it before you threw it? *(beat)* You know, I skipped my period once.

BRIGID
It obviously turned out alright for you. What happened?

SARAH
Nothing. It came back in a few weeks.

BRIGID
You mean, you just didn't get it?

SARAH
I was hiking the AT. The full moon came and nothing happened. I read somewhere that if you're doing a lot of strenuous exercise, like backpacking or bodybuilding, it's possible to stop getting your period. It has something to do with body fat.

BRIGID
Was there any other time?

SARAH
No. *(beat)* So, have you found anything?

BRIGID
Maybe. Oh my God, a woman in Maine lost her libido after skipping her period.

SARAH

What?

BRIGID

Shh! She said her and her boyfriend gradually stopped having sex, and then she skipped her period. She said she knew she wasn't pregnant, but afterwards she lost her sex drive entirely.

SARAH

I'd blame the boyfriend. Did she post any pictures of him?

BRIGID

I don't think so.

SARAH

That's it then, he's probably just really unattractive. You know what they say about the first six months.

BRIGID

I'm scared, Sarah.

SARAH

You aren't going to lose your libido.

BRIGID

How do you know?

SARAH

I don't. But I don't trust things on the internet either. What are you looking at, anyway?

BRIGID

A message board for people with hormonal problems. There's messages here from all over the world. Look at this- this woman said she skipped her period and found out she had an ectopic pregnancy.

SARAH

What's that?

BRIGID

You know, when it starts growing in your tube. They have to go in there with a scalpel or something and cut it out.

SARAH

Egh.

BRIGID

She said she had two thousand dollars in hospital bills. But at least she didn't have to deal with the child.

SARAH

Deal with the child.

BRIGID

Two thousand is hardly anything. I mean, we're talking diapers, food, babysitters. She'd have to drive the family car until she could buy her own. And college! Out of the question.

SARAH

What makes you think it's a "she"? You don't even know if you're pregnant or not.

BRIGID

I had a dream. Last week, the night I made David go home. I hadn't slept by myself in a month, and I think that had something to do with it.

SARAH

Something to do with what?

BRIGID

The dream I had. I felt like I needed to sleep alone, so I asked him to go back to his apartment and went to sleep. Sarah, I saw her. She was tiny, hardly up to my knees, but I saw her.

SARAH

Your daughter?

BRIGID

Yes. No. I mean, yes it was my daughter, but it wasn't exactly a girl.

SARAH

What the hell is that supposed to mean?

BRIGID

She was a wolf, Sarah!

SARAH

A wolf.

BRIGID

Don't say it like that, I'm serious! We were in a field and she was running in the grass. She was small and gray and her ears were still down. She was running with her little feet across the field and she was my daughter. It was like I was her wolfmother. *(beat)* What are you doing?

SARAH

I think I might be able to enjoy this conversation more with a beer in my hand.

BRIGID

We don't have any.

SARAH A

snack, then.

BRIGID

(in a panic) No! Not in there! The crackers are on the counter!

SARAH

(stunned) So they are. *(takes box and limps back to table)* You were saying?

BRIGID

That's it.

SARAH

So let me get this straight. One night last week you had a dream. In this dream you saw an image, no, a fucking *vision* of your daughter-to-be.

BRIGID

Right.

SARAH

She was a wolf.

BRIGID

Right.

SARAH

And you were her wolfmother, whatever that means.

BRIGID

Right.

SARAH

And you're still considering killing her?

A beat. They stare. BRIGID stands up and crosses to the window, standing, possibly leaning against it.

BRIGID

Abortion isn't evil, Sarah.

SARAH

Right.

BRIGID

The baby isn't a baby yet. It's an idea.

SARAH

An idea.

BRIGID

It's a collection of thoughts. A little ball full of other people's expectation of who it should or shouldn't be and how it's God's gift to the world. It isn't itself until it's born.

SARAH

That's not true—!

BRIGID

Let me speak! It's not a life until it's born, and depending on who they have for a mother, they still aren't living their own life. I mean, look at you, you've been anxious to be a mother since you were twelve or something. You grew up seeing your mother and your grandmother and wanted to be a little carbon copy of them. You may have been raised with the idea that abortion is evil, but it's time to grow up.

SARAH

I see, so you call accepting abortion a step toward maturity?

BRIGID

Exactly.

SARAH

And you called *me* the fucking idiot?

BRIGID

How many "life skills" have you learned simply so that you can help out your little baby some day? How many lists of things you'll do with him do you have in your closet? Things you want to teach them. I bet you have the first fifteen years of his life already planned out, don't you?

SARAH

What's your fucking point?

BRIGID

My point is this: what kind of mother would you be? You've got all these pre-conceived notions,

you wouldn't even recognize him! You'd say, "that isn't my child, *my* child doesn't act like that. My child is going to grow up to get a doctorate in medical law and save the world. My child is going to be a messiah to all suffering souls. My child is going to like The Lord of the Rings. My child is going to be anything but what he wants to be!"

(*on her feet*) Abortion is wrong.

SARAH

It's my body.

BRIGID

It's a life!

SARAH

It's my body.

BRIGID

It's a living, breathing human being!

SARAH

It's my body!

BRIGID

SARAH slaps her. BRIGID slaps back. Repeat. SARAH takes box of crackers and throws it at her. Crackers spill on the floor. Silence. BRIGID turns and sits in her chair, facing away from SARAH.

I don't care if you think I'm evil.

BRIGID

I don't care if you think I'm closed-minded.

SARAH

It's none of your business.

BRIGID

It belongs to the entire world.

SARAH

It belongs to itself.

BRIGID

SARAH

It's your responsibility to protect it.

BRIGID

I am.

SARAH

You could give her to me.

Long beat. As BRIGID speaks, SARAH crosses to the "SNACKS" cupboard and opens it, picking up the test. She looks at it and, without pause, limps back to the center and throws it on the table.

BRIGID

Timing is everything. It's what my mother always said to me. I'm the mother, so I have every right to decide whether now is the time for another child. Where do you draw the line? Do you think it's easy? Do you think I'm happy about it? That I'm going to skip joyously to the clinic? Do you think she won't be running through my dreams until I die? You think I won't be wondering until the day I die if I've made the right decision or not? Whether I can function, or even live with myself? Do you?

SARAH drops the pregnancy test on the table. BRIGID stares at it before breaking down into tears.

SARAH

Just like mine.

She picks up The Fellowship of the Ring and exits stage. BRIGID holds the negative test and continues to cry until

Lights down.

The Temple

I have wanted a body that,
like a cathedral bell can
survive many years

with one glowing note
still resounding beneath
the skin. I have wanted

a body that, like kudzu
would not stop growing.
The old men at the coffee-

house nursing tin thermoses with
wrists now brittle and
dry— they should be great trees.

Warrior-colored oaks firm as
ancient samurai, their hard-
earned muscle still frightening.

The morning I hiked
from Tenant Mountain to
stand barefoot

on Shining Rock, I felt
naked. The quartz humming
like a chapel full of whispers,

I could have come from
any century. The memory of
Crete, sitting in the cave

where Cybel taught Heracles
how to hold a woman's heart-
slowly, like the song of

a white crane— I saw flashes.
Kingdoms. Courtyards of shadow faces
projected into my mother's womb.

The afternoon I stood

and watched the sun darken
behind Cold Mountain, night

forming like a burn,
I wanted a body that
could sit like a growth

of quartz, sacrificing nerves
for a skin that echoes,
patiently waiting on

nothing in particular.
I have wanted a body that,
like Valmiki's, could sit

nine years in the Himalayas,
ants building their mound
to the crest of his bald

head, watching thoughts form
slow as seasons, the
mountain sweetening his

insides like a blood
orange until, at last,
fully ripened by stillness

the earth eats him.

The Hunt

When she pressed the birth mark,
I felt my breath go out.
In a past life,
us running on the plains,
chased by men with
bison blood in spirals
on their foreheads.
Even from the bedroom
we can see them,
the place where the wild god
entered their eyes, hot
as cobra spit.

Now lying in bed, both
marked by their arrows,
she touches mine: a hook-shaped
inch of hair guarding my heart.
Hers, removed as a girl,
now ghost white on the back
of her thigh, where the laser
cut it.

Like breathing into a fire
the image grows. You
dark-haired, priestess
of the mountain's shadow,
face soft as prairie grass. And
me, javelin-hurler. Son
and daughter
of the antlered god.

Now walking the streets we watch
for eyes, wondering who has
inherited our war.
Like the refrain of an ancient song,
we watch for the troubadour,
the lone musician still playing
as he leaps, rooftop to rooftop,
bone flute clutched in his hands.

Rite of Passage

When I was young, men were all muscle:
arms that rake hay in the afternoon,
great fingers that could grip a snake's head
and press out venom like pus.

When I was young, men were firm as
good leather, tough as lawn mower blades.
Made from long hours shoveling in the sun
until your skin looked like shade.

They were the men on TV my father did not
laugh at. Or other fathers that wore blue
jeans, drank Miller Lite out of cans, and
went to church on Sundays.

When I was young, I was all glasses and
nose. A pale boy with skinny arms
who spent afternoons reading. I did not
know how to walk in the woods.

I could talk about places with heroes and magic.
Boys like me who grew up to ride
dragons or slay them. Stories of Native American
youths who could make fires and skin deer.

I remember thinking, *how much easier it would be:*
to be let into the woods, alert and watching
for the flicker of antlers, hoof-prints in snow.
To run, to hunt, and return the stuff of men.

But I did not.

I was broken in like young boots. Hard and
swift in high school hallways, gauntlets of
words used like brass rings.
Rocks like wasps in the parking lot.

My rite of passage took place in the living rooms
of parties, where baseball bats were furnished, and
my ego the piñata for hitting. It was the friends
who would take off and put on my name like a scarf.

The things I did not do, like writing my
enemy's initials on black paper with red ink.
Or finding them alone in the street, a chunk
of concrete the size of a fist held in my hand.

Or the things I did, like learning how to break
three boards without bruising. Like forgiving.

It was the day I learned to hold my happiness the way
camels hold water: private. Nestled in a thick, well-armored
hump that cannot be touched, and can carry at least
one exhausted body alive through the desert.

Hunter

It was an hour earlier, wearing camouflage
boots and the hormones of a doe
on his mosquito net, that my father tied the deer
to his pick-up truck.

A spray-legged mascot of ropes and antlers,
I remember seeing its head bound straight
to the truck's ceiling as it drove up the drive-way,
my father emerging like a sweaty lion.

Then, 6:15, he argues with my mother
waiting in a satin dress on the front porch. 6:18,
in the shower, washing the forest from his
beard, they argue.

Now, 6:30, he is dressed, hair combed back, neck and
wrist sprayed with Brut or Old Spice
we are in the car and driving to the party.

It is the boss's anniversary, and my mother is late.

By the time we get there, the arguing has stopped. We
are greeted at the door by an old woman who smells
like an attic stuffed with romance novels from the 70's, and a chihuahua
that does not stop barking until we leave, and I know it is because
he smells us, what is in us

the deer family with wild eyes that has stepped into his home.

Antlers

Your ears came before you did. Furry and erect,
and still quivering as you walked into the clearing.

We have come early in the week with a pick-up
truck and left sweet potatoes, corn with the cobs
half-open. And you are hungry. And the wind is right.

You enter, the branches above your head
becoming antlers. Only two.
The winter has not had time to make you
a fierce, proud-statured buck.
But you are male. And that is why I have
come with a shotgun and not a camera.

I watch you for ten minutes. You know the
deal is too good, can smell our deception:
white men in camouflage hiding in the trees.
Excited by your stupidity, our cruelty. I have
been taught by pictures in magazines
where to shoot so that you fall without running.

Have seen pictures of men dragging your cousins
by the antlers, making dark paths in the leaves.
Yours will be too small.
And you are hungry. And you have not looked up.

And Death did not tell you this morning that
a young boy wearing the scent of the city
on his shoes would claim you. That
one unworthy child would, before dark, be
crouching over his kill,
and it is you.

The Roar

There are places you can go where being
a regular has benefits. The coffeehouse
that surprises you with a hazelnut latte on the house.
The mother well-watered with phone calls who
stocks the fridge when you visit.
There are places where you can feel welcome.

On Saturdays I wake up early to the alarm
clock and pack food for one day's trip.
By noon we have driven to the trailhead of
someplace we have not been, or perhaps have
and not remembered.

We hike until our smiles find us: sun that
successfully breaks through trees. We laugh
mostly, with breath we cannot afford to spend.
Like a street musician who, after playing all day
gives his ten dollars to a homeless man.

Every few miles we stop and I pull the
camera out to take pictures of deformed rocks,
trees with exposed roots, or you- doing mundane
tasks like tying your boots or examining fungi.
We pass a dead limb hanging from the
lower branches, and my inner-Conan acts:

jumping up and pulling it down only to
launch it at the mountainside. It lands head-first
and splits like an arrow shot in half
by the second arrow. And I roar. And you look at me
like someone patiently observing a child
rather than a madman. And that is because you know.

You too, the forest nymph who has taken off
down the stream, hopping rock to rock,
have found that important thing- the woman who is myth
who is child. The sun goddess who is water who is wind.

Our feet rumble these hills like a storm.
The ancient thunder of hooves from centaurs within us.
The antlered, thick-haired beasts
of myth that the world has massaged into us with song.

Cave paintings on the walls of our heartbeats that glow.

The bowl that once again is full.

There are places you can go where being
a regular has benefits. Places
where you can feel welcome.
I have found mine.

Most Mornings

Most mornings she rises without me
a crumpled piece of paper unrolled before
the window, and walks into the living room.
She lays out the yoga mat, uneven and bulging
with notebooks I left on the floor. She calls it
the cat posture. My calico agrees.

I awaken eventually, to the sound of closing hoods
from the mechanic shop next door, or the noisy
robotic arm of the dump truck as it lifts the dumpster
and then, like cymbals, or an industrial Tyrannosaurus,
pounds the metal together. Pizza boxes and bottles, like
conversations in our sleep, rumble down a long throat.

I remember waking like I remember puberty, bodily:
the nearly-violent shudders, like a man lost at sea groping
for flotsam from a shipwreck, and fights against drowning when
drowning means waking. But I never dream. Instead I
lump into the living room, landing on the couch like an expensive blanket
and listen to hers, and wonder if it's copyright violation if I write them.

We are brilliant cartoon characters. An arts-and-craft project
of the gods; two popsicle sticks of even length glued together
at the heart and decorated. She wears my earrings. I wear her beard.
Too poor for anything else, we eat quinoa for breakfast, for
possibly the twentieth time since November. No room
for a table, we eat on the yoga mat, playing chess with important faces.

We can't afford cheesecake. We can't afford the cds that we want to share.
We can't even afford a new leg for the chair, and so we prop it up with
used books, eat toast with honey, and listen to the soundtrack from Amelie
for perhaps the fifteen-hundredth time. And we do it, knowing full-well
that we can't afford to wake up in any other way than this:
bodies stiff, but warm, and rising with the city, the cat's tail knocking over
all our chesspieces. Awake, in love, laughing.

The First Day of Winter

Today is for the amber noise that catches in dream
catchers like angry flies. We eat them
like fruit, organic crystallized pineapple grown
sweeter from fermenting, closeness to death.

Today is for remembering to bring our tools in
from the rain. The rusted axe head that needs
replacement, the flat-wheeled wheel barrow that
spits out pinecones every successful rotation. Today is for
replacing the curled guest room wallpaper that
the humidity peeled off in the summer.

Today is for the cleaning of fan blades that, resting
for the first time since March, sit exposed and dirty
with conversations. Talk that happens too late into the night
and stains the white edges like cigarette smoke.

Today is for caulking the windows, writing letters to friends
in colder climes and asking for the proper way to insulate
the walls facing North.

Today is for remembering to cartwheel.

Like snug cats afraid of the vacuum cleaner,
we hide ourselves from the sound of the wind blowing.
Stock up on movies, preserves, Harry Potter books.
We turn the radio to A Prairie Home Companion
and sigh at the summer re-runs. Nostalgic already,
we remind ourselves how people in Alaska must have it,
and feel better. We learn how to let the light leave,
traveling west to India or Africa to ride camels
with bare feet.

Today is for listening to sea shells
we found when we could still walk in
short-sleeved shirts to the beach.

Today is not for resisting the
season's rinse and repeat.

My Cat

I remember when you were young, afraid of purring.
A white and brown shadow lurking in the hallway that
would sneak up on the bed only when you thought I was asleep.

Now, you walk room to room of our
small one-bedroom apartment, as if
to say, "I am here, now your day may start."

Now you jump on the bed in the morning,
the alarm clock's ally, to say, "it's my turn,
get to your world of coffee, term papers,

dusty theatres. Wanting to change the world.
I've seen your outdoors with its traffic lights,
cold wind, coyotes in the shape of cars.

I've seen the mafia of stray cats, some missing
ears, others missing whole tails, as they prowl
the parking lot at night."

Your masterpieces have already been made:
careful geometries in the litter box, the rate
of plants eaten and thrown up on the rug.

You are your walking art, a hairy white canvas
of strategic black and brown spots. Sometimes separate,
the lone brown spots on your lower back, the black

braided up to the tip of your tail. Sometimes sharing,
like the chestnut freckles near your eyes. All you need to do
is be. Exist. To spread out on the floor like an expensive bear-skin rug

You find me during finals, sitting cross-legged
in the living room surrounded by stacks of paper,
books squatting open with spines exposed.

Smelling my attention, you walk over to the thing
I need most, and lay down, hiding it beneath your
furry belly. Too smart to think you that you seek

attention, I tug it from underneath you, knowing
that it now has your protection and divine favor.

I read you my poems as I write them, and watch your

reaction. A yawn means the images are stale and watered-down.
Walking away to play with pen caps means that my
voice is weak and shaky. I read you this one, and you stare. That's good.

Before you moved in, my professors gave me 'B's
on account of the lack of cat hair between pages.
Now they wave at me in the hallways.

Calico, psychic, scholar. Musician
who perches on the window pane thwacking the guitar
with your tail. You are my cat as much as I am your statue.

When After Dinner

It is when our cats have left the room
their well-fed tails passing
like trained Cobras beneath the table, and
our plates are at last empty, I find you:
the dark-haired woman with
New Mexico cheekbones
 sitting at the kitchen table.
We have been wearing our days like armor,
thick coats of mail that now clang to the floor.
Our eyes, like tired pelicans flying
since morning, now settle for the largest object
to perch on. You aim for my head.
We feel the night stretching behind the window.
Can feel the three hours of homework yet
to be finished buzz in the back of our heads
like moths caught in the lampshade.
The late water bill staring with slit eyes
from its place on the refrigerator door.
We have heard the chorus of responsibility
like the pounding bass of the neighbor's car
and still we have chosen this.

Brave students of happiness
we know it is our love and not us
that holds the world straight as fire.

The Sagittarius

The times when you are full Sagittarius, a Christmas tree lit up with all-red lights, I feel like a mischievous boy, who opens the box of grown-up tools without reading the warning; who, knowing better, keeps touching the hot oven until my fingers are red, each time thinking I'll outrace the burn.

During those times you leave the 100-watt bulb and travel on as light, spilling over the textured ridges of a blind man's globe all at once: one foot on New Mexico while the other runs barefoot near Tuscany; bright and warm and never asking permission.

I love you then. Then you are a white-headed thorough-bred and, saddleless, I ride on you over the dirt roads of your past, your future, wherever your talk takes us. Squinting at love like a traveler heading toward the sun and beholds it full-bodied: red, sudden, and unstoppable.

We sit in the same room like cavemen prodding a dinosaur skull. We talk politics, women's suffrage, the rhythms behind religion. We sit, holding the bones of something far older than ourselves, putting it to our ears and listening for the sea's jazz to guide us to buried treasure.

Excited, I rush to the bookshelf to quote someone. You reach to the branch of apples in your mind, and quote someone you've met. Together we glue a husk of words and apple seeds. A ransom letter written to the universe cut from newspaper headlines of words like "wish" and "forever". On the top it reads: Or Else.

The Pisces

"Only a guitar could have painted that" she said, her voice echoing the Lexington Avenue art gallery.

A year later I remember the painting:
Flamenco dancers red as old brick dancing around
a charging bull.

"How do you know?" I asked her, feeling dumb
and she said "because I was one in a past life"
like it was the most obvious thing in the world.
And I felt jealous, imagining her in some
Spaniard's callused hands as he makes her sing,
patient strings hungry for his careless touch.

And so I pick up the guitar I bought last winter
because it reminded me of your stomach, and I
ask if it's a Pisces too.
And so on Saturday I get drunk on red wine and climb
to the roof, my ear pressed against it.
I strum soft like tucking hair behind your ear,
with fingertips so hot I'm afraid it'll catch on
fire. And I listen for your breath in the grain, waiting
to hear it catch or quiver, anything resembling laughter.

But I don't.
And so I thrash it, ignorant, like some mad prophet.
Like Nero playing to himself while Rome burns around him.
Photographs in my lap I'm too cowardly to burn you out
of, so I burn myself: an emptiness with warped
edges in the shape of a man with big hands and a beard,
in the shape of a gun-shot deer.

A few doors down a dog begins barking, and
I think about how only a guitar could have painted it;
harsh and gruff and perfectless.
And I think about how a guitar must have painted us,
headstrong and wrong, like a tape deck who only plays
the fast song nobody wants to hear, and plays it loudly,
and doesn't care.
Painted in that place of noise before being birthed
into melody, sticky with our mothers' sap,
the guitar's slowing coo's.
And so I toss it from the roof, and listen as it crashes.

The Street Minister on Television

The sun's panties
have hardly hit the ground
and still your TV is on.

The living room, ghost-lit
by a small humming box
images flickering like addiction.

Is it boredom that threatens you
from the heavy skin
of silence? Or is it fear

that if you are not seeing—
if new thoughts aren't bubbling
like paint drops on the flat steel

crust of your mind- that you are not
living? No. Incorrect.
Do not pass Go, do not collect

a hundred years or less spent
in placid hibernation. Choose living!
If not the fire leaping from

gods' hands, choose at least
a sleep that does not
end in cold static.

The Street Minister on Faith

What I really want
is a saxophone. That
and a pair of good
wool socks, that way

I can stand on the
street and play songs
for the statues. Like
last night: the man

in the top hat and
flannel shirt. Came
into town with a violin
case over his shoulder

at 3 o'clock and played. I
saw it happen. The stiff bodies of
couples starting to dance,
coming alive beneath the streetlight

like a scene from a
play they've rehearsed
since god was a boy.
They didn't know I was

awake. You see, when
you start seeing the sky
during sunset as the
quilted-together clothes

of children in heaven.
When you start watching
the patterns of pigeons for
signals from higher beings.

When you start scheduling
time to wander aimlessly
beneath the hand of your
Author, stopping at

street corners just to listen
for the pen scratches— then,
and only then, have you
made it out safe.

The Street Minister on Armageddon

You want a poem
I'll show you my feet
after walking here
from the camp in

Woodfin. Last night
the vet from Korea,
the war that no one
talks about, tossed

my socks in the fire.
Told me they stank
like cat shit and
woodstove. I told him

it's this city that stinks.
Like a lion I make
the most of my food,
use my muscles just

to yawn or laugh every
little while and show
I'm still awake. I told him
it's this city becomes

the carcass of an antelope
killed too long ago:
to eat it would
just cause indigestion.

You want a poem
I'll show you the place
in my head where
all time stops. I call it

the Bermuda Rectangle,
where every clock, head-
phone, computer screen,
and radio signal fall

like pigeons flying
through a windmill. Like Cupid

or Icarus or whoever,
the boy that drank too

much and tried to fly
into the moon. They all
get eaten. By the
ocean if they're lucky,

by faulty memory. You see,
they'll tell you I'm homeless
when in my arms I
hold all homes. They'll say

I am a bum when
I spend my days making
castles while you're
making money. They'll

tell you I'm poor when I'm
emperor of my solitude,
filling this body with
songs instead of

wanting. Covering these
walls with the drawings
of children, newspaper
headlines from every language

spelling *love*. Hear me.
When the sun wakes up
and the mountains throw
back their heads and

laugh out all their
fire, you will want
these hours back. These
days filled with doing,

with never having enough,
will soon rest like
debris on the ocean floor.

The Homeless Man

The homeless man cannot live on white bread alone.
When he is hungry he gets up from his bed in the woods.
His bed is a blue tarp tied to two pine trees and staked to the ground.
At night he covers it in leaves and dirt, so that no one can find him.
Knowing much, he keeps his rings hidden in the inside pocket on his coat.
He keeps his youth hidden in his beard.

The homeless man walks out of the trees and finds the nearest road.
Knowing that roads lead to people, he walks toward town.
Full of cars, his thoughts are already on tomorrow.

The homeless man's day is a night sky lit up by stars.
The stars being food, water, new socks.
A woman to find and maybe speak with all hours into the night.
A man to find and maybe speak with all hours into the night.
Knowing much, he keeps his needs close, like a man before a storefront window who sees both
himself and the things behind the glass.

In town, the homeless man finds the nearest library.
Inside, he walks to a shelf full of books.
Knowing nothing, he can take and pull with ease, stacking them under his arms as if things that
could make him warm.
When finished he goes to the counter and gets his books stamped.

Now ready, the homeless man walks back to his bed.
Arriving before dark, he goes and finds sticks for the fire while humming.
Full of songs, he cannot remember the words.

By night the homeless man is frying Milton with canola oil and berries.
He sautes full Moliere monologues with salt and leftover mashed potatoes.
Still humming, he dices Ovid's hexameters with a Swiss army knife into edible clumps, and eats
them raw, full of vitamins.
Knowing that he cannot read, he knows there are other ways to consume words.
Knowing there are other ways, he ingests them carefully, eating each as if they were a rare
vintage of intellectual insect, served best on a white bread bun.

Answer to That Teacher

You criticize the sprout for not being a tree.
 Wart-nosed crone, isn't your job producing
 enlightened, aware, imaginative folk?
 From that eighth grade window where I sulked.

Funny, I always thought the sound of enlightenment to be
 a harp chord, or the distant knell of some bell ringing,
 and not a flood gate shrieking closed, rusty hinges
 snapped inside one boy's ribcage when his teacher told him

No. You will never amount to anything
 but a pen scratch, a vagrant goatskin lacking rhythm
 and never a drum.
 Your stories speak too much of magic
 too many shining knights, barefoot fairy dances
 in the moonlight.

Too much dragon's fire, too many duels and
 princes and not enough town criers.
 You cannot operate with prepositions,
 subjugate precision, with your
 scribble-scrabble diction,
 you cannot even claim
 with your pencil, the sounds of the rain.
 To you, they go 'ssshang, ssshwing, song'
 when listen now, it's clear they
 'drip, drape, drop', and you are wrong.
 To you the ceiling streaks of ivy, hawk shadows
 and butterfly wings,
 but it's clear to me that
 the ceiling is bleached bone-white.
 (as it should be)

Well. To you, my english teacher
 (whom my spell-check demands I capitalize
 but I ignore its whimper)
 to you, I say this
 that the grammar should serve the literature
 and not the reverse.
 You see, to you, weaving words
 is for upholding the deathbed dogma
 of a language that some bored monks

glued together from gothic linguistics.
Taking Germanic tongues and
knotting them into Latin cages.

And to me, your words and phrases are
equal to a streak of paint who can't
stop arguing over its color.

And to me, the passionate fire
that first folded literature from
cave paintings forever bleeds
with flawless imagination.

That grabs the universe by the tail
and rides it someplace your
chained-down, pit-fallen mind could
never find.

And yes, I may mispronounce your pronouns.
And yes, I might make adjectives of verbs
or end my sentences without a...

But my sentences will never end.
I am from a kingdom, where the passion
of human beings
means more than the enslavement of expression.
And I would be *your* teacher.

The First Rehearsal

The night has been reserved for our work.
I have told you it is important, and you
have believed me, setting aside three hours like
diced zucchini to be cooked.

We arrive at the space. I have wanted an
acting studio with good acoustics, a wall
with mirrors from one end to the other.

What we have: a friend's empty living room
that echoes. Instead of tables and elbows
we have pillows and tea. We are all nervous:

The short-haired girl who has treated theatre
like an ex-lover on the street, whose eyes
she has been afraid of meeting lest a
familiar heat consume her.

The man with big arms who I've asked
to grab brilliance hard, and ride
like the tail of an enormous animal.

The trained actor who has learned to open
emotions like steel garage doors.

Even I, who have written the script, who
have huddled you into the room like cows
asked to mate, could not finish my dinner.

Sage enters, offering left-over spanikopita, and
we wonder if, somehow, it's really pronounced
spani-ko-pita. We discuss it for ten minutes and laugh.
That's good.

We begin asking questions, talking about the
characters as if they were good friends of ours.
Old women under hairdryers who aren't above gossiping

"Do you know who she has feelings for? What,
would you say, is the reason he pulled a gun
on him? What does Mark do on Friday nights?"

Two hours have passed and slowly it is yours.
A river that has happened from many straits.
A property whose mortgage is heat.

Now you are on your feet and acting. I watch
for the first inflections of words, the natural
pauses of lips and hands. The dull shoulders of motion.
And I understand.

I have written tall puddles for you to stand in.
Empty black socks that have already
begun to form the shape of feet.
That stretch like something that is new and beginning.

Soon they will be too small

Techie

The light comes on, a
stream of amber birthed
from the iron shell
in my hands.

"Kick it up", she says
from thirty feet below
her white Nikes' lit up like reflectors.
I press it down.

She turns from the light
knowing it too holy and blazing
for eyes, and spreads her arms,
"hit me", she says.

My wrench busy, I loosen the bolts.
The instrument is old, a Leko
from the Kliegel years,
I squint and push with both hands.

The rust wins. "Working!" I shout,
voice half-caught in the rafters
with the ghosts of other voices, of
directors still demanding excellence.

Of those like me:
the black-clad denizens of
a subterranean world, crossing catwalks
and beams like bones of old temples.

Like crows we arrive after the action,
entering the battlefield under our own
scrutiny, dying for nobody.

We have mastered the art of passing
in the shadows, of vanishing and
appearing on the opposite side,
a passage of stage-whispered feet.

With a tug, my arms break
the dead iron,
age that had once rested on

raw necessity releases

and the light moves, covering her
shoulders and hair, forcing her from
darkness. She is a woman now.

"Lock that", she tells me, and I do,
wrench echoing the sleeping theatre.
I know that tonight there will be
light, that a packed house of clapping

people will have seen the leading lady.
And I know it is because of us.

Night-workers of spectacle, it is we
who have architect these dreams, who have
made the mirrors and smoke
for life to fall through.

New Friend

These past weeks I have watched
you stir from hibernation.
The sorceress waiting with
her back against the palace
wall, her lips and eyelids
ice. She has entered
her frost into your spine
like venom too deep
to suck clean. When we
try our mouths emerge
toxic and purple, spitting
as if after eating blackberries.

If fatherhood could be taken
and swallowed like a pill.
If any man living could learn
the feeling of earth filling him
like a duffelbag weighted with dirt,
we would be millionaires. The
man I have seen in you—

spear-holder, marathon-runner,
beard-grower. The woad-fingered
sprouter of bruises who would
insist on anointing them after—

you have entered my life
by canoe. Your body, wrapped
and doused in gasoline, a
Viking ceremonially prepared
to ignite via searing arrow-
head. Now washed in
salt water, your cuts burning
with new life, we know
the cost of standing like
Woden's sons, our blood-red roots
cutting down through
the concrete. We learn how
victory can be harder
than defeat.

Seeing Daphne

It is too late.
She has laid too long
in the sun, the lush
grass growing around her shape.
Now jasmine buds sprout
from her fingers, her hands stretching
up to the sky, as if made
from swan bones. The earth
has entered her wrists.
Steel yourself, for there is now
no hope. She has returned to
the goddess of her mother's mother's
mother. She will not leave this
for our church.

On Teaching Hellenism

From the journal of Julian Augustus, Martius 362

First we tell them they cannot teach Homer
while ridiculing the gods that spoke through
him. The memory of Theocritus before the lectern
at Athens, how he stood in front of the room of
us- incomplete scholars eager for truth-
to tell how Horace knew secretly the coming
of The Christ. It is my will that all
Old temples since ransacked return
from their Galilean tenants. That Phoebus,
victorious, be rethroned at Delphi, and the
winged feet of Mercury be seen again
dancing on the Hyacinths in spring.
My friends, it has been too many emperors since
the daughter of Demeter was escorted home.

*Apostate A letter to**Maximus of Ephesus from Julian Augustus, Martins 362*

When it first happened I was a boy.
 The philosopher's hand on my shoulder,
 and me guided through the markets of Antioch
 like a sash. A clean purple thing
 that would ruin should
 the corners brush against
 women,
 the dark arms of men who
 haggled in furious Greek.
 Or the children
 weaving through the stalls like Furies,
 balls of flatbread in their fists.

I had eaten bread and cheese for lunch
 like them,
 had eaten plums at night and taken sips
 from unattended cups.
 I have learned, like them
 how to hold my hands when praying
 to The Christ.
 But they have lesser Uncles.

We stopped at the square, near the old
 statue of Zeus
 where I would one day sacrifice
 three bulls, their auspicious hearts twitching
 like still-breathing fish in my hands.

Albanus was speaking with a man
 selling crucifixes. I heard them above me,
 two adults wearing the new god
 from their necks
 the way wise women wear chicken bones,
 or the Evil Eye carved in wood--
 when I saw the True God.

Above me:
 more than the blood-throned king of sunsets.
 More than the broad-shouldered blacksmith

of hours.

More than the emperor
who first hammered speed
into the legs of horses.

I could only stand.

A schoolboy at the edge of a world
that would some day dawn with me.

—Then, cut like a stem
the shadow of my teacher's hand
fell across my face.

*"Don't stare at the sun, boy!
It 'll ruin your eyes, and then
what kind of Emperor would you be? "*

Poem for a Girl

It's easy to just watch it: the light
cast through the window, traveling
from the English Channel
around your dad's old rocking chair,
to somewhere over in Asia Minor-
all along your floor.

Watching it like a painter's lazy yellow gash
that can't make up its mind about which corner of
your mom's blue carpet
it wants to inhabit.

But it's only Sunday afternoon here,
lying on the couch like two crowded animals in a zoo.
Like your body was a balled up piece of paper
and I was the waste basket God had thrown you at.
Or like I was a passing housefly
caught inside your dream catcher.
We make less sense than pillows.

The sermons are still buzzing like
carpenter bees, merrily golden and fat in the back porches
of our minds.

The first time I went to your church, I remember being
white and small, staring at the crucified Jesus'
chocolate skin. I didn't understand when
the crowd said 'Amen'.
I thought it was the polite way of
telling the pastor be quiet and stop, like saying amen before you eat.

I feel like a sailor on Sundays.
Like I'm standing at the top of the mast and looking out
over the edge of the world:
the week starting all over again. School and purple sky,
I can smell it like a storm. Something's going to happen.
Like when the sun encounters India on the carpet. It's
always India when my mother calls, tells me it's late
and that I have to go home.
But it's only crossing Persia now,
climbing mountains like a late-in-life Alexander the Great
who I can't convince to stop.
And so I let him march, slowly darker and bloodier.
And so I go back to sleep.

Oven Door

She is a recipe, a folded page scribbled with
 someone's great-grandmother's Lasagna instructions.
 Start with: honey, wheat flour thoroughly
 pressed and moist with dreams; add sugar,
 spice, brown rice thrown at
 weddings, the ashes of old photographs burnt
 in a clam shell.
 Red glass from a torn-down church collected
 on your three-year anniversary. Add rose water.
 Then,

Stir twice, teach how to play basketball, play
 chess without boxing gloves.
 Bandage knee after skidding on the driveway,
 take on a horse-ride, slow and dangerousless
 through the forest. Avoid religion. Instead, teach
 how to eat strawberries in white clothes.
 Then,

Work the batter: keep smiling when finding
 her empty room the first night she sneaks
 out, balled-up magazine pages
 in the shape of a sixteen-year-old girl
 under the bed sheets. The first time she calls
 from someone else's house and hangs up when you
 ask if there are any parents there. The morning
 you start counting the money in your billfold to
 keep track of how much she steals.

Then,
 Put in the oven. Let the gods breathe heat,
 hammer her like sharp metal into the shape of
 a woman. Do not notice her face when she comes home to
 visit: tired eyes. A battleground after the battle where
 the wind is still afraid to blow. Now she
 takes off and puts on men like a thrift-store shopper
 with a low budget: but the shoulders are too tight, the
 waist too baggy- or there's a gash in the fabric and
 buttons missing.

She's moved in with one of them: flimsy. Constraining at
 the arms and legs, but fashionable.

You call every month or two, looking through the oven door. Too smart to open it and let the heat out. All you can do is watch her slowly brown through the years until: sudden, in the middle of the night, the buzzer goes off.

She moves out of his house. Calls you at 3 am. to let you know she's okay and says that she's staying in a hotel, but she's seeing an apartment tomorrow. Her baby is crying in the background, but there's a sturdiness to her voice that lets you sleep easier. And so you go to sleep. And so you know that you have done a thing well, and that a new oven has been opened.

She is a recipe. A folded page scribbled with someone's great-grandmother's Lasagna instructions. Start with Love.

Juniper

In the morning I will come and bring you
 shoes with sunflower prints.
 Four hand-carved dolls of wild mustangs
 to come alive in your sleep
 and carry you through the wild ravines of dreams.

In the morning I will come with one music box,
 One hairbrush stolen from an underwater tower
 of mermaids
 One treasure chest of rings that become octopi
 at night
 and dance across the dinner table scaring guests.

One ability to smell thunder in New Mexico.

I will, under no circumstances, ever call you June.

Junebug, Zooniper
 Junigator

Or exercise my parental right to embarrass you
 in front of friends.

I will never sing "Hey Jude", but instead sing it
 "Hey June",

Or enter your room without knocking.

In the afternoon I will bring you
 One undamaged snakeskin from a ten-million
 year-old serpent
 digging tunnels for arteries in the center
 of the earth.

One tall orange candle to be placed in the heart
 that never stops burning.

One deer-god's antler velvet that,
 when rubbed on cheeks, lets you see in the dark
 and speak Portuguese

Or,
 when mixed with four parts dried dandelion and
 three parts pomegranate juice
 lets you recite the alphabet while doing cartwheels.

I will bring you a book about a brown-haired girl named Juniper,
 Who was raised to be a princess in a far-off palace;

where girls grew up to ride on the backs of unicorns
instead of wearing black clothes
and serving people food or coffee.
Where young women are taught to stir
big cauldrons of magic with wooden spoons
and not treat their bodies like
prisoners of war.

In the evening I will hold your mother
who is beautiful
who you have not seen, and
become one of two large animals breathing
in the night.

And I will wonder what it would have meant:
waking up prematurely, the alarm clock's
pale green numbers reading 4:14, and
one long-haired girl crying from the next room.
One olive-skinned girl thrown ashore from her dreams,
just remembering how to fill the world with sound.

I get out of bed, stumble against the doorframe
and take you with hands large enough to hold oceans,
and bring you here to lay between us.

In the evening I will come and bring you
One green-eyed rush of flickering life
One rapid river filling the space between two mountains.

Sleep now.
In that place we cannot touch.
That vast continent of children
who could not yet be carried into the night
by two strong pairs of hands.