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MEAT AND BONE

Beth Barnyock

A Thesis

in the Department of

English

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Master of Arts at
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ABSTRACT

Meat and Bone

Beth Barnyock

Meat and Bone is a collection of elegies concerned with probing questions of grief, identity and religion in the context of loss. The title poem, "Meat and Bone," an elegy for my sister, explores the tensions between the physical body and the self, and the way loss inscribes itself on both the living and the dead. This long poem moves from the discovery of the body in a freight yard to a photograph of the sister on the evening news, to a tattoo used to identify the body. The poem's culminating question is that of the manuscript as a whole: "How is it we identify a body, claim it more than meat and bone?" *Meat and Bone* demonstrates a range of styles, open and closed form, lyric and narrative. The collection concludes with a crown of sonnets, entitled "Ichabod's Crown," which resurrects the character of Ichabod Crane from Washington Irving's *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*. The sequence exploits Irving's sense of Sleepy Hollow as the land of dreams and resonates with the collection's overall concerns with mind/body and life/death.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

MEAT AND BONE	1
CHOOSE YOUR PARTNER	
One, Two	4
Blowing Smoke	5
Old Spice	6
Ringers	7
Home Economics	8
Cock N' Bowl	9
Choose Your Partner	10
Put Her Down	11
Interlocking Sonnets: Bodies Lost	12
Vigil	15
Shooter	16
Pay Your Weight: Post-Christening at the Ground Round	18
BLOODLETTERS	
Bloodletters	20
Ike Tells a Story	21
Hannah's Goats	22
Yes, Sir	23
Squatting Above the Square Pan	24
Two Souls Unite, One Skips Out	25
Rafters	26
Grace	27
Thicker Than Water	28
What Came First	29
Another Myth	30
SHIRTS AND SKINS	
Skinny Dip with Deer Skeleton, Lincoln River Bank	32
Clay Pigeons	33
Hunter's Shed	36
Training Wheels	37
Picking Swamp Blueberries	38
Compost	39
Preservation	40
Dig	41

Pre-Harvest at Red Water Creek	43
Pressed Flowers Found in the Song of Solomon	47
The Cactus Spider	48
Plot	49
ICHABOD'S CROWN	51

MEAT AND BONE

elegy for my sister J.B. 1975-1993

I.

He unleashed the dog and waited, plastic bag in hand.
Sparky barked, nosed along the tracks.

Tall grass flapped in the no-man's property between station, line and road.
Commuters with cheeks pressed to glass, watched it sway as the 6:42 lunged toward the city.

The overgrowth, the long fingers of grass, a hand –

Grey stones, a flattened penny, rusty nut and bolt heavy enough to fill a fist.
The anchorwoman's red ankle-strapped shoes stand in evidence –
Police report it could be any one of these objects that litter this stretch of track.

II.

They keep flashing her senior photo on the news: braces airbrushed out,
lips retaining the awkward smile of something to hide.
She thought about taking pliers and breaking off the chain-link of brackets, wires, bands,
but waited, had them removed a few weeks before.

Tongue fresh over teeth, she sat out back and ate apples all morning.
She took a few big bites from a Delicious, tossed it,
grabbed a Granny Smith, bit again, tossed – the ground collected rotting cores.

III.

He didn't check her ID because he was in an opium glaze.
She took this as a stroke of luck, removed one boot, peeled a sock.

She picked a rose – a stupid, ordinary rose – dull as a butterfly or rising sun,
the best she could afford, and paid with wrinkled bills.
It was, after all, the portrait of her middle name.

Opium Glaze inked her skin. The needle scratched lightly like rain on a windowsill,
then vibration sank straight to the bone. She bled a little toward the end.
Opium covered the fresh tattoo with a paper towel and electrical tape.

*There you go, missy, you'll have it for the rest of your life.
I'll touch it up half-price if the color fades.*

IV.

What is left when the soul transcends the flesh, the last train, the words
marked in near-belief to comfort the mourning?

How is it we identify a body, claim it more than meat and bone?

The Polaroid square in an officer's hand, some dental records,
a dog at dawn sniffing a greening rose.

CHOOSE YOUR PARTNER

ONE, TWO

I watched my father kneel at the foot of a
throned stranger, bend his head to linoleum,
nod, prop the heel. The iron grillwork
wrought on the lid of the wooden coffer

took hold and married sole to its shadow sole.
Dad wrung a cloth around the old, weathering
wing-tips. He dipped a brush in ink and,
polishing, darkened the leather surface.

He grabbed the cloth and buffed the brogue business shoes
bright black, then poked his fingers in, cleaning each
eye-hole. The smack of Coleman's Own wax
deadened my senses as Dad paused, made change.

One, two, he whistled, *buckle my shoe* as he
took out his pocket handkerchief, bowed to my
church-white shoes, spit and rubbed until they
gleamed, but the scuff on my heels shone coal black.

BLOWING SMOKE

Billy and me were hanging out, out back.
My bony elbow propped against the door
of the garage. My father's Cadillac –
cool blue – glistened like oil in porch light. Sure,
he was just six, and boys will do as boys will do,
but I was hip and slick and serious.
We wondered if a barber comb kazoo's
wax paper buzz and hum were like a kiss.
We leaned closer. Our hard lips hit, then spit.
So that's what boys were made of. The littered ground
displayed my father's mess – spare change, tool kit,
a couple bottle caps. I reached down, found

a cigarette butt burning its full red tip.
I touched the end to my – then his – two lips.

OLD SPICE

Sprawled on the bathroom floor, my leg up on the tub,
J. kneeling beside me, testing our father's razor on her finger.
Two parallel lines snake-bit the skin.

She soaped my legs, applied a layer of thick foam,
ran a fat line. I held taut, pointed toe –
my legs straight boughs with the apple of ankle and knee.

Admiring the smooth, the lotioned shine, we anointed ourselves with Old Spice,
posed in front of the mirror and knew what it meant to be wanted.
Pulled our socks up when knuckles struck the door.

RINGERS

Flicked comb, cuffed sleeves, pool stick, tattoo
of Virgin Mary (bleeding heart).
Chronic cigarette rarely lit
but always hanging from the lip
(removed to stress a point, replaced).

Whether or not Beau is a trick
of memory or actual cliché
is lost. What I remember is
this: hair whipped in a whorl despite
the regression of a widow's peak.

Beau and I – fled from blanched turnips,
wet asparagus, the hamper J.
mistook for a trashcan, grandma's
incessant air guitar – at one
of those diners: silver bowls
of pickles, puckered green tomatoes
squat like Auntie Rhoda's thumb.

Beau's cigarette replaced with a dill
(removed to say: *Hungry? Me too*).
The woman behind the counter stood
two catsup bottles lip to lip.
The red water slid down the glass.

I was a new thirteen. Beau not
even related despite the claim –
I'm a dead ringer for your old man.
We split an order of sauerkraut
and pierogies, sodas jerked from the tap.
I studied the way his butter knife
navigated scraps to his fork's blunt teeth.

That night, I slept over at Beau's
and he turned out the sofa, propped
his head on a yellowing pillow, one foam
roller clamped tight above his scalp.

HOME ECONOMICS

Two halves of bodies –
my father and the man I call uncle –
peer out from a Cadillac:
Dad below the hood, Beau beneath the body.

One – ‘weekend pants,’ t-shirt slung
from a back pocket, torso lost in the engine.
One – knees bent, jeans faded in peaks
at the crotch.

A puddle of oil glints iridescent
in the driveway’s grit.
I sit by the edge of the garden
holding a wide-mouthed jar,

a newspaper’s rubber band
securing a cloth over the lip.
Flat on its belly, mung beans sprouting –
a can of worms.

Cherry tomatoes ripen on the cage
like boils. The half bodies rifle.
A dipstick greases an undershirt.
Beau checks the shocks for seepage.

I pull a loose thread on my skirt.
Rows of vegetables –
pink buds of sweet peas, strings of scarlet runner –
dart against the gravel.

A gulp of water leaks through the cloth
onto my knees.
Inside the jar, a lazy head
sticks out its tongue.

COCK N' BOWL

Knee sock stripe bent in barstool chrome,
my thighs – two bowling pins knocking
beneath my skirt.

C'mon. bird-bird. Let's roll.

Beau kneels to tighten my rented shoes –
an elderly tan with red laces.

He's recounting past heroics:

I was standing on 20, bellying to 8 at 40 feet...

It's a haggle with a punk kid for the lane.
The little objector – braces and customized tote –
puffs up, recedes.

.Alright. .All taken care of, bird. Showed him who's wearing the league shirt.

Beau's pointing out
the various arrangements of pins
down the lanes... *baby split, bed posts, cherry, blow,*
picket fence, washout. .And then, of course, you've got your
straight ball, working, creeper, curve –

I throw a dead ball.

It's your delivery. .Aim for the pocket. The kingpin.

The pinsetter sweeps up deadwood from the deck.

Use the spots. The arrows look up pigeon-toed.

It's about Visualization –

me outside the alley
crouching by the kickstand of his bike,
his bowling bag unzipped by the wheel.
The reek of Skin Bracer on my collar.

Gutter ball. Butcher's Wax oiling the lane like pomade.

Keep your elbow close.

Relax. Free your swing.

Balance.

His thumb and fingers span the ball.

Behold perfection.

Split. Two pins weak in the knees.

Beau's fingers fidget in the holes. Spare.

CHOOSE YOUR PARTNER

Red-faced death opens up her mouth and bellows.

Church bells or the railroad crossing,
Mrs. Lil yodels me and Billy home for lunch –
grilled cheese triangles and tomato soup with a parsley sprig.

Some things you can't look up and find like a word.
Like the way to say *look, he's not coming back*.
Like Mrs. Lil. Member of the PTA and NRA, featherdusted in her husband's slippers

and volunteered at the Rainbow Center as the Square Dance Club's caller.
Come on mister, grab your maid. Head couples half promenade.

Billy and I perfect our do-si-do under a mounted $\frac{1}{4}$ ostrich,
its beak caught in a squall.

A dancer snaps, yanks his partner into position.

Billy's foot presses the penny into my shoe.

The figures on the floor move like the mills
we passed in the Winnebago last summer,
where the wind's so shrill it drives you straight into death's aproned bosom.

PUT HER DOWN

DOG'S hind leg (left side) was like one of those twin pops
you break in two
and swap half for another flavor,
whittled down in anticipation of the riddle written on the stick.

Once, DOG bit Mom.
She drove herself to the doctor's,
the track marks on her left arm wrapped in a dishtowel.

Once, J. came at Mom with an ice pick,
planted a row of little holes in the kitchen wall.

Us girls
raised a little more animal than human –
the bird's nest of J.'s hair, the inability to play dead.

J. and I at the end of the driveway,
red chins and hands sugared black,
watched as DOG's body rattled in the trunk.

INTERLOCKING SONNETS: BODIES LOST

I. TWO BLACKBIRDS

Blackbirds string the wire like busted shoes

– paired.

We scour the ground – dropped pop tabs,
red tops, spark plugs – for a ring of keys,
kill time between rushing headlights with sips
of whiskey and coke, label it a lost cause,
resign ourselves to a night locked outdoors,
knowing our empty beds won't be spotted 'til dawn,
save the dog's tick and grunt, "*Where you been?*"

Silhouettes stagger along the power line.

We untie a shoe – one trainer, one Chuck Taylor –

knot the laces. You wink, lean back: throw.

Birds scatter. The sneakers catch. Bent tongue,

gaped mouth, slit eyes. We lean like wounded convicts,
debris easing the arch of our bared feet.

II. TWO DRIFTERS

We sit in the mouth of a crane – swig our booze.
The day's abandoned construction equipment jabs
a crooked skyline, forecasts the arteries
of Betty Brite's, Inn & Out's, and strip for tips
joints taking over the lot.

The rig's hooked jaws
embrace us, keep us dry from the downpours.
You place your bleary head in my lap – yawn –
and pull my battered jacket up to your chin.

The city writes itself in a pulsing sign:
a cowgirl – hips, thighs, ass corked with a pig's tail –
blinks at billboard Joe. Boots over her shoulder,
a girl in a nurse's uniform saunters
out of the club. A duo of derelicts,
we skid through the mesh fence, onto the street.

III. TWO SHEETS

At the doorstep, the shades of a muumuu
blotch above the print of a morning tab-
loid – sensation and assorted sleaze.

We hang like ghosts, wait for the figure to slip
indoors, unaware of being watched. She draws
the blinds, lets dawn crack on the kitchen floor.

We plot our course (*home free*) from the neighbor's lawn –
Mrs. Kukla (hair wrapped in plastic, forked pin
in fingers) slings linen on the clothesline.

The rope runs from a stake to the stout trailer.
She shakes each garment – shirts, shorts, pantyhose –
then limbos beneath the rope to rescue one clung
sock from a pair of drawers. The air inflicts
a breeze – beats the folds from two white sheets.

VIGIL

When the dead enter your dreams, they don't speak.
Their bodies are sluggish –
week-old balloons tied to a bedpost.

They linger
just outside your peripheral vision.
You keep waking up bruised.

The expressions of the dead are deep-set,
formed from repetition –
this, then *this* and *this*.

movement above the brow.

You can bully them all you want.
Their mouths are stitched with a waxed pin.

SHOOTER

Last Sunday, caramel apples.
This morning, popsicle stick crucifixes.

In the back lot next to the cemetery,
a half a stick of chalk and a shooter in my back pocket
I challenge the minister's daughter
for a bag of cat-eyes. *Playing for keeps.*
Marbles arranged in a cross in the middle of the circle.

~

Strung on a necklace made of clay beads and macaroni,
the minister's daughter wears her name: MIRA.
She's eating one of those mini ice-cream cones
that taste like a sweetened host.
Free at the candy store. *Try me.*

On Wildwood pier, we stand behind carnival cut-out bodies.
A pot-bellied devil in a Speedo and a pink-winged angel
in a polka-dot bikini.

~

At fifteen, I learned my father had wanted to become a priest.
This was dropped casually into conversation like the weather.

I mention it now only to explain why, at the time of the game of Ringo –
a red marble rolling toward my knee –
he sits wrapped in a checked blanket; on his lap, the heavy antique bible.
He fingers the fraying duct-tape on the spine as he stares at the names –
births, deaths, generations scorched in the empty space.
Yellow highlighter in hand,
he marks the passages about redemption.

There is none righteous, not even one.

~

Seven-day isolation. One girl infects the other.
Miranda's strung over my lap, undershirt tossed over head,
pox marks on her back. Our skin pink from calamine.

Home on Sunday,
we uncover a paperback in the basement:
a nineteen-forties sex guide that makes no mention of "the act."
Not even a diagram. My father's name penned inside the cover unashamed.
The doctor's advice marked with biblical stars, underlines, brackets, checks.

Stroke with the fingertips, not with the palm.

We read through the pages, coo over the terms, mime the fingertip action.

~

At fifteen, I watched my father scrawl the name of his first daughter
under the Bible register: Deaths.

His pen tapped against the marriage column on the opposite page.

By this time, Mira had been caught
in the Pageant closet with a tenor,
her head propped on a stuffed lamb.

At the funeral, she handed out prayer programs.
Her father read:

*“all things are cleansed with blood
and without shedding of blood
there is no forgiveness.”*

~

At the side of the church is a row of peonies,
white flowers devoured by ants
not unlike droplets of blood on a towel
around the waist of Christ.

Singing, *we are weak and he is strong,*
I knuckle down on the pavement.

PAY YOUR WEIGHT: POST-CHRISTENING AT THE GROUND ROUND

Each under-twelve on the spring-loaded scale
beseeched the needle to tally the cheapest toll.
The Ground Round Clown provided ginger ale
in paper cups. Plastic baseball cap-bowls
brimmed with sundaes. The over-twelve cut up
the rug in post-church-jukebox-praise-Him-glory
as second cousins caught in loveseat worship
swore their conversion revelatory.

This was rebirth, my body dunked and dried –
bible revival at the ground protein joint
off 95; salad bar, soup and two sides.
A thumb doused in a lukewarm beer anointed
my forehead. The Reverend sang *patty-cake!! patty-cake!!*
weighed me in ounces like a T-bone steak.

BLOODLETTERS

BLOODLETTERS

What we were told
that year left at Aunt Hannah's
after Uncle Ike died –

Our skinny legs hung
under those white slips we wore to swim in
and on Sundays as dresses

huddled under the mosquito net for Bible school,
Hannah unfolding the felt board
to display the cruelty of the fabric cross
softened by the rising dead
(a gown stuck on the crucified figure)
or last week's suspended raven shadowing the dove.

Thursday and I'd been thinking how Hannah said,
what we see under water is unclean.
J. rolled onto her stomach,
poked a stick into the muck
and mimicked what Hannah said,
*If you girls get stuck with one of them black bodies,
you come a'runnin' to Hannah.*

I threw my arm over my eyes to block the sun
and suddenly J. stood above me naked,
stripped to use her slip to hold it.

What she said before she jumped in the water:
how if she bled me, I'd be hers;
the white shift falling above me.

Hannah with a basket lunch
found me there,
pried the leech from my skin
with two forks – the way we were taught to tear meat
without a knife – a red island rising on my chest.

And J., arms outstretched, balanced
along a fallen trunk,
mumbled some myth
we learned to repeat and play –

Something about an angel
rolling back the stone.

IKE TELLS A STORY

Ike loved to tell this story:
he and J. split the first pew.
He sat upright; J.'s legs sprawled
against the bench as she wrung hands
into – Church – Steeple – People – Church –
Steeple – People. Morning stained the windows
with the dull pasture, a Shepherd hauling a bowed cane,
a lamb. J.'s eyes traced the ceiling to its curve,
then fell down to the bald spot on the priest's head –
the candlelight flickering in his glasses.
Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.

Hannah didn't like the Catholic Church.
She thought all the talk of the Devil
would frighten us children. *We can believe
in God without believing in the Devil.*
She didn't let us sing the part
where Satan hides behind the bushel:
Don't let the Devil wick it out was replaced
with more shining. Later, she became Lutheran,
taught Sunday School.
Ike wouldn't tell this part of the story.

He'd jump back to J. poking
her this-little-light-of-mine-finger
into his side. Bored with Mass, J. shouted
"Amen! Amen!"
Everyone laughed. Imagine that. Catholics.

J. sang: *Let it burn, burn, burn.*

HANNAH'S GOATS

Hannah brought in a billy
and Lucky – in heat – circled the pen.
The sire nodded, bobbed a wiry beard
and cauterized horns, struck a hoof against the dirt.

Hannah in her oversized housedress,
breasts one large barrel above her apron,
caught us at the shutters, schooled us:
what we saw was not human.

This was before we understood
what Hannah meant when she let slip
you'll know the Devil when you see him –

YES, SIR

(After *The Devil's Nine Questions*)

J. chalked the frame.

Pick a penny,
Drop a penny,
Hop! Hop! Hop!

Sing: "I will ask you questions nine,
To see if you are one of mine
Or God's forgotten child.

What is whiter than milk?
What is softer than silk?"

*I wear the white like a stain,
Sir, and silk runs down my mane.*

"What is louder than a horn,
Child, what is sharper than a thorn?"

*The bird is louder than the worm;
A thorn is nothing to the germ,
Though I feel it in my spine.*

Chalk the squares,
Chalk the block,
Number up to nine.

"What is higher than a tree,
Girl, what is deeper than the sea?"

*Heaven backs the sky,
I'll go there when I die.
Jack climbed there on a vine.*

"What is innocent but the lamb,
Babe, what is worse than womankind?"

*The lamb wears black wool,
Yes, sir, yes, sir, a bellyful,
Plump round the waistline.*

Like this:
skipping the 5 and standing heron-style
to pluck the mark.

SQUATTING ABOVE THE SQUARE PAN

Hannah shifted her large frame.
Through the hole in the goat stand,
Lucky's head twisted. J. dangled a flip-flop
from her big toe.

I warmed my hands in my armpits,
took my turn straddling the stool.
The wood ripened in a standing pool
of sour milk, musk and shit,
tainted red with teat dip.

J.'s aim was perfect.
She could squirt me two yards easy.

The white square –
what little made it inside –
Hannah brought to a bare boil on the stove.

TWO SOULS UNITE, ONE SKIPS OUT

Under the ivy arch, the bride and groom posed.
Alone, behind a row of ribboned folding chairs,
sipping his *wedding remedy*, Ike buckled
like a dog at the end of its chain

forgetting the limit of domesticity.
Reddy, the actual dog, ring pillow strapped to his back,
broke through the rank of bridesmaids' taffeta.
Against the a cappella rendition of "Talk to Your Heart,"

Ike seized his boutonniere, his Dutchman's Breeches.
On the ground: a curl
of lemon rind, his body.
Reddy entered the frame –

album slick of bride and groomed,
grins thick as a slice of cheese on apple pie.

RAFTERS

Ike's lifelong hobby:
constructing model airplanes out of drained beer cans.

Milwaukee span, Budweiser pit,
propeller by Natty Bo.

The night his soul *went and transcended*
we tried to fly them in the rafters,

watched them cling to the air for a moment,
then become pieces again on the ground.

In remembrance of Ike

on the hospital gurney –
ribs peeled back like barn doors

we got into the gin,

soaked our fingers and savored our thumbs –
the only way to stomach it.

In the coop, using straw as cigarettes,
we fed goatsmilk to the chickens;

they gorged until it shot from the holes in their beaks.
That familiar voice:

Oh my angels.
Then, *I'll beat your wings off.*

GRACE

J.'s slip dress flapped above the black threads
of Lucky's prizewinning coat.
We quit riding after Hannah confirmed three kids,
her arm disappearing to the elbow.

We could tell Lucky was ready to give by the slowed breathing.
J., foot braced against the rump,
pulled one out by the head

– then, three kids and blood on J.'s dress,
Lucky licking the afterbirth.

Every supper, before we ate, grace:
Thank you Lord for the birds that sing,
Thank you Lord for everything.
A pause for Ike.
The meat on the cutting board at rest.

THICKER THAN WATER

We sat in the barn on a clump of hay
because it was a biblical setting. J. pushed
her thumb along the line of the safety pin.
It popped. She placed it in my hand.
(Two figures on her shoulders conferred).

*This is my body. This is my blood.
Go ahead, stick it in my finger.*

I did as I was told,
though it wasn't easy to draw the blood.
After a good minute of jamming, I heard: *Ow*.
This meant payback. J. pricked the silver
into my finger with the skill of one born
two years before me. It didn't hurt that bad.
We touched our fingers together, pressed like a kiss,
withdrew to our lips to suck the wounds.

The blood ran in red ribbons – second prize at the fair.

WHAT CAME FIRST

We sold our eggs alongside the road
after the local farm shut down our *nonregulation dairy*.
Two girls, double-yoked eggs and a pitcher
of lemonade we used to lure customers,
banging a wooden spoon against the side
of the glass as we stirred the apple slices
and mocked the country accent:
aw lawdee, it's as hawt as haydees
or as Hannah would say when we got to fidgeting,
heightening her tone to meet the company,
they find fahm air oppressive,
and waving an old holy card as a fan.

J. sang: *what came ferrrst. checken o' tha eggg?*

Hannah says the Bible says its chickens.
(And in my company voice)
It is not good for man to be alone.
Lo, the beasts of the field

– *and while he was sleeping, God opened his chest.*

Hannah watched from the kitchen window,
filled the wells of an ice cube tray.

ANOTHER MYTH

The browned maple seeds jettied from our fingers,
sliced the air. We cracked one pod clear open to find
the hard heart-shaped shell protecting its seed.

The lawn covered in circles of wet leaves.
We took turns grabbing the other's arm,
sent ourselves whirling to a heap, exalted
in the swift crack of spines. We built and destroyed,
built and destroyed the piles, watched the breeze
caress the trees, entice another leaf to let go.

The smell of Hannah burning the first pile
smoke-signaled the day's end. I buried J.
under one last mantle of damp leaves.

She emerged with an earthworm caught – nude –
in her strawberry curls. I pointed and fled,
spied from behind the trunk of a dogwood
as Hannah pried through the tangle of hair,
pinched it out – pinched it in two. The makings
of another myth: *Let it divide and regenerate,
regrow and multiply.* Like sin itself.

SHIRTS AND SKINS

SKINNY DIP WITH DEER SKELETON, LINCOLN RIVERBANK

I.

Possessed by the sun, an arc over our backs,
we stripped and dipped in the river.
The body's response to water –
a shudder, a dropped quill, a lover's flirtation.
Arm locked around shoulder, elbow bent, hand on chest.
The water – cut silk around the legs of a swimmer.
The body – compact, unerring. Skimmers lingered above rocks,
a goshawk shrieked downstream, stark trees knocked against the river.
Then, rising out of the bank – a white cage – hooked
on a fallen ash. The open carcass entwined the trunk,
its ribs turning inward as a grin crooked to laughter.
We thought it human – female, small.

II.

The angle at which the skin hits the water is indifferent;
what registers is impact – the chill, immobilization,
the wake of a new lover or a skeleton breaking the surface
of a pool. Here is the stick we used to stab the figure.
Here, the dirt clod or bit of undigested fur –
muscle into gristle, gristle to bone. And further,
an antler branching, bent, severed from the skull,
from the territorial slash, combat.
You took as trophy, as cue:
the sexual weapon, the velvet slough.

CLAY PIGEONS

1

The first gun Joanie held was a rifle. She was taught the four positions:

Standing erect, elbow on hip.
Sitting, legs crossed, not touching the ground.
Kneeling on one knee.
Prone

as in positions of pleading.

2

The Moot girls stayed in the Scouts 'til Joan was a Senior and Francine a Cadet.
After troop meetings, Joanie shot skeet

in a skort, knee-hi's and muffs. Fran killed time trying to put up
the lot of her hair with a single pin. Joanie pumped the 28-gauge.
Chin out, eye above the shotgun rib,
stone from the waist up, PUI!!

From the high and low houses:

two simulated birds in flight.

Joanie recoiled. Fran's hair flopped down.
One disk dusted. One fell to the ground, split

like the rock doves the girls found on the street –
never the body, only the wings.

3

Joanie was the first on the block to wear her hair
in a loose ponytail draped over her left shoulder –
the trend during the summer of the gypsy moths.

Joanie in tennis skirt, Fran in twiggy glasses.
Under an ivory-yellow umbrella,
they walk through a shower of caterpillars.
Baby's breath brushes against Fran's ankle.
Fingers on the umbrella stalk
curl inward as mimosa when touched.

This was the summer that Joanie noticed Jack,
their paperboy, now drove his father's Buick.
Fran held the reigns of two bucking dogs while Joanie and Jack
went up the cliff:

Joanie's skirt against a cork elm, newsprint hands under her shirt.
Wisps of hair against the roughness of bark.

Fran joined the Cadet effort, spread the bacterium
before the first white moth broke free.

+

Cigarettes limp at their lips, bodies half-mast,
Fran and Joanie crooked over a cocked lighter.
The flame quivered before it hit the tip.
Inhalation drew postures up – rope and wheel.

The girls picked tobacco for 'crush cash,'
paid by the bushel, 20 leaves a hand.
Joanie in her John Lennon Specs,
sunlight freckled on her cheeks through the brim of a straw hat,
chatted with Fran – the fast-talk of teenage girls.
Fran, softer than her sister, tanned like summer squash.

Beneath the gauzy net,
they bent to pull feet from the stalk,
spines curved, necks hidden in leaves,
the bowls of their skirts heavy with the resin of sweat.

The plucked tobacco clipped to the line
braced the cord like stunted flags.

5

After some Daisies found Jack's Buick at Camp Wuc-Cha-Ta Falls,
Joanie went on a restricted diet –

In the mess hall, she ripped the leaves off an artichoke
(drenched one spade in butter and struck it from her tooth),
stripped it to its fuzzy purple choke, ate its heart.

Fran earned her environmental consciousness badge for the use of limestone
shards in the construction of a mosaic hotplate.

Jack's car was abandoned save a patch-plastered sash.

At the traps, Joanie's lips above the barrel
blew a kiss.

HUNTER'S SHED

Under the blanket, skins lose their camouflage.

Cheeks flushed, warm from the morning run,
we watched our breath take shape
and fade. You stretched your limbs
against a maple, rolled your neck.
At your feet, an animal's prints dropped in the snow.
The marks crept past a row of huckleberry bushes,
branches like the soft heads of cattails shorn,
the joints of stripped twigs bared to the wind.

We followed in long strides, but void of instinct
sank to the knees in snow. We broke
into a hunter's shed, shed the wet clothing.
Our running pants hung alongside
the fluorescent suspender suits on the wall,
above the dropped point knives for dressing game,
a goat's foot axe sloped beside a pack basket.
The eyes of a whitetail decoy watched us, naïve –
our pink legs ripe against the carving table.

TRAINING WHEELS

Tangled in the breeze, anxious streamers whip
the metal handlebars. One foot rests curbside,
perched in a groove; one takes root in a ply
of congregating leaves. Aunt Rose's hands
flutter over my back. She whispers: *balance*.
The wheels totter and spin. Silver bars
gleam in the late pre-supper, setting sun.

A filmy flicker – Rose as a girl, but older
than this body choreographing the hill.
A gutter of light revealing an unfamiliar object
on her dresser – the double hook and eye
of a white bra, the cotton flushed with dimples
like excited skin. In the mirror, stripped to her waist,
arms twisted around her back like sprouted wings
– which also start as single lumps of flesh –
the cups sagged, bags of heavy cream half-full.
Her breasts in training for their future role
as suckle, spout, spigot.

On the street, the jack
in the spokes clips decayed and browning leaves.

PICKING SWAMP BLUEBERRIES

Annual, plastic, a sieve – our bowl
of bruises awaited its fill. Garbed in knee-high
rubber galoshes, Rose and I stomped the weeds.
I mocked their length with the stretch of my ten years –
toe to fingertip. We circled the backyard bush
and reaped the sluggish summer blooms.
The berries wild, clustered sister-close.
We tossed the ripened fruit to the bowl, rejected
the miniature, still-green beads. A knot of berries
bouqueted in Rose's hand, her swollen wrist
wrapped in a worn Ace bandage. She rubbed one with
her thumb, examined the ruptured bud, pinched it
in her fingers like the hard pit once leached in her breast –
the bowl filling with insignificant fruit.

COMPOST

The magpie's egg we found split in the alley:
small, slick, water-tower blue,
hollowed by a crow.

(Later, Rose produced a book on the subject.
one family feeds on its own kind. Omnivorous.
the crow consumes nestlings, carrion, vegetable, garbage.)

For now, I stuck with the object:
brittle as burnt pudding,
bubbles on the surface.

Maybe it hatched.

Rose said this as she knelt
beside the overturned trashcan at our feet,
separating the scraps from the rubbish and ash,
gathering the compost in a carry-out bag.

Loot for the rooftop garden –
leaves, coffee grounds, clumps of hair, clippings of weeds.
The humus breathed like a wrung sponge,
swallowed the shell.

PRESERVATION

Before the first snow,
the body wanted to be discovered –
before some child
flung from a greased platter meant for a goose
might find it glossed under the ice.

So the snow waited
all through November.
And the body waited
at the bottom of the ditch,
where it lay down and took it like a man.

DIG

– Pick up your side, the tail's dragging.

– What?

You think this's easy? The mutt weighs more than I do.

– Pick it up, will ya? Show some respect for Chuck.

– Chuck's dead. He don't mind it. Do ya pal?

Chuck didn't say a word. Not a single word.

We propped him against the barn like a pitchfork, four prongs straight up, rummaged for tools: spade, rake.

– What ingod'sname are you gonna do with that? Claw your way *into* the grave?

Pitch and chink of shovel. – This ain't working.

– Keep quiet.

Think of poor Chuck.

– Chuck's dead.

– Keep quiet, I said.

Before we knew it, we're kicking dirt like we'd stepped in shit.

– This ain't working.

We picked the garden for stones, hurled one over the barn for Chuck.

– Bet you can't hit the weather vane.

You should've seen that fuckin' chicken spin.

We lugged back rocks from the far side of the barn. Stood proud of our hard work.

– Shit. Will ya look

at that!

Chuck's tail stuck out like a mast.

– Fix it.

– You fix it. Your hole's too shallow.

– My hole?

– Shut it.

Chuck's tail was stiff as a fence stake. It took damn near an hour to tuck it in.

– Look's like Chuck's got a right good restin' place.

– What you going on about now?

– Bones and ghosts.

PRE-HARVEST AT RED WATER CREEK

I. DRESS UP

Prep time took hours – the pick of the right shade of pink, a plush pale with a wet black and netted stocking, the press of a jean around a thigh, the fold of a hemline, the pull on and off of dress, tank top and skirt. Your clothes fell loose and low against my not-yet-bled curves. A *cherry-bomb* fingernail pinched a silver stud through the ear.

We contemplated the night's cosmetic bag of catcalls and lacquered in *deadly nightshade. scorpion seduction, white midnight no. 509, juice berry stick*
– face to face, we used the other as mirror – the glow washed into our blush the way the moon glosses water. You painted the punch of a lip, rose-dusted a cheek. Your brothers' faces appeared in the doorway – Caleb, then Jacob and Micah. They caught your hot glare and took flight. You plunged a thumb in dim blue shadow, smudged my eyes.

II. PEACH SCHNAPPS

Her child like a sling around her neck, your next-door-neighbor –
a boxy blonde with a grin that bore both rows of teeth –
tipped through the screen door, one hand deep in the clothespin pocket
of her dress, the other letting her daughter down to the porch.
“C’mon in girls.” We went. From a paper bag, she plucked
a skinny bottle – its label torn, peeling, stuck
with the fat shape of fruit. “Now, get! Before your dad
comes home.” Under our bare feet, the bend of dead man’s curve
twisted and rose. Someone’s truck backfired in the dark.
I broke the seal with a thumbnail and drank, passed it
from my lips to yours. A stray dog sniffed our bony knees.
You bit the bottle. The scent of velvet scratched your breath.
A pair of eyes caught ours and scuttled up a tree. Hand round
the bottleneck, we shot it in and watched the world
crush, go to fuzz – clearer than clean water, deep swig
and swallow. The empty bottle pitched to the dirt curb.

III. EARTHSTARS

Mushrooms sprouted on the dead stumps, the dry rot and moist
bed cloth of decay. Their bodies split, turned out
and rough as leather. The rays slit in the shape
of a star, pricked on its tips. Moonlight
hit the pregnant white – a purse of seeds –
each in a delicate tension, readied for release.

I extended a finger, enacted the first droplet of rain
disturbing the skin. A punt from your curled toes,
and destruction raged – the crowns kicked off, the sacs collapsed.

Puffs of powdery spores blew out dust through a breach
in the cap, stretched modest wings, barebacked a quiet breeze,
then rose like spent breath, under the cuff of your skirt.

IV. BARN RAISING

Out in the rented space of the barnyard, two faces –
comedy and tragedy – hung against the pane of night.
A toothless and balding creature doled out cans of beer.
He pulled you close. Your body squirmed. His longhaired mate
with a full cut of teeth and a shiny leather jacket
– half-cocked zippers and dangling fringe – began offering
the ladies private midnight tours on his saddle horse,
the field weeds galloping beyond the edge of the farmhouse.
You broke open two cans, listened to their firework song –
the pop and fizz – then yelled at your brothers to get back inside.
We climbed into the bed of a pickup truck and because
it was empty, we filled it with the stretch of ourselves, then recoiled
to the warmth of the other. The space we left becoming loss.
The night before us moved like a black wing – a bat's
contour maneuvering in low flight. It grew cold.

We cracked stems into the bonfire, one by one.
Was it you I watched through the movement of the flames or just
another mask appearing bare-faced against the dark?
You were there – strung on the length of your father, the clutch of his arm
around the lip of your shirt – the trigger pull of a shadow's
flicker shooting repeat takes of your face, eyes'
abnormal symmetry catching me across the filter,
shifting, knowing the way we need each other to burn.

PRESSED FLOWERS FOUND IN THE SONG OF SOLOMON

“O you who sit in the gardens,
My companions are listening for your voice –
Let me hear it!”

Solomon 8:13

My fingers run along their spines,
pluck one.
Two figures sit in a circle
of gold leaf. The woman’s skin is a thick cream

clothed in deep blue and garnet.
She holds a book on her left leg,
an infant on her right. The child’s eyes
trace the slight plate of light that rests above her face.

A flat black ribbon keeps the page, unfolding
the garden my mother kept where she held your neck
between two fingers and tilting your face toward hers,
glowing, snapped at the bud.

Low-growing cloth-of-gold, I raise you from your corm
– rise – I hold up your crown – now rise –
Open to me, my sister, my darling, my one perfect one.
Come rest on the goblet of my palm.

Now caught between these sheets
of wax, settled into its shape
like things so long buried
they become part of the earth,

love-in-a-mist – stopped still –
gone rugose. The threadlike bracts flatten
their bluish wings on a page.
Transparent leaves let words press through:

Put me like a seal over your heart.

Put me like a seal over your arm.

THE CACTUS SPIDER

The shadow of the spider on the yellow-lit drape is
briefly human. A leg lounged seductively
over the trim with the coyness of a peep show girl –
it dangles on silk, then eases itself onto the sill.

The cactus, also human – a splayed hand catching the thread
of the body. The confusion of parts like clumsy lovers
or the thin column of figures in Giambologna's *Rape of the Sabines* –
spines, areoles, fingers, flesh. The swollen stem of the cactus robed
in the spider's slender legs, the insect pricked by a spike,
the standing figure embracing the airborne captive.

The third figure – crumpled, beaten, sagging on the couch – witness.
The spider, the cactus, the human shadow on the shade.

PLOT

Here, the arch of grass is careless as the contours of the dead.

I keep coming back to a girl – okay, a woman and not her,
but her body – found in the kind of grass that grows near dumpsters
and startles you when it brushes your leg after dusk.

In the black bag is only the fruit I bought and did not eat,
so soft against the knife it wasn't worth keeping –
the way it didn't part to speak or run.

ICHABOD'S CROWN

ICHABOD'S CROWN

1

This is the dream of the body in flight.
The legs pull back and rise slowly until
the body is a plane, its own horizon.

On the front lawn, a child stops dead still
with the discipline it takes not to move.
This is the dream of the disembodied:

in their arms are the heads of their lovers
made animate, begging for their bodies,
reclaiming a sense of ownership of what
is missing --

A head finds flight by contract, a surrogate
bears the bundle --
carried flat (a cake box on its cord)
and likewise arriving at another's door.

Arriving at an automated door,
Ichabod pushes a silver cart. With list
in hand, he strolls over to the Super Store's
produce aisle. His fingers under the mist
fumble with a thin roll of plastic bags.
Above the cauliflower and brussels sprouts,
he picks a single head of lettuce, snags
the last vermilion onion. The checkout
girl holds it up to her neighbor for the code,
plops it on the scale, rings the cans, hits *bill*.
Ichabod slides his platinum credit card,
crumples the carbon receipt, overfills
a double bag, tightens his busted Nikes,
and loads the basket of his Gunpowder bike.

A briefcase in the basket of his bike,
Ichabod bends low over the handlebars,
his nose lingering above the bell beaklike,
elbows akimbo, coattails flapping at cars,
trousers tucked in his socks. He locks his steed
and makes his way late to the basement space
reserved for the part-time unsalaried,
a folder of overheads packed in his case.
He patches the faded letters with a thumb
and felt tip pen. The transparency throws words
on a screen. The faces of his students numb
in yellow light, a shadow on the chalk board

flits. Then, what someone whispers like a bullet.
(And we can see the break in his shadow, the cut.)

We can see the break in the shadow, the cut
of the scissors around the shoulders, the snipped busts
stuck on the bedroom wall. Ichabod objectifies
women: the plump Van Tassels in *Hustler*,
Weston's stills – the light on a pepper's back,
the legs of a white radish or a cropped nude.

A tomato sits on the secretary's desk
in the Medical Research Center's waiting room.
Down the hall, the "I am Joe's" slide show echoes:
Cancers develop in the lower bowel.
Exams using the flexible colonoscope
mean less discomfort. On the office wall:
an x-ray poster of a human skull,
a Kirlian photo of torn holly.

A Kirlian photo of torn holly,
 (half a leaf and its halo), a news spread:
*I was floating on the ceiling, but a holo-
 graph of my legs appeared to lie on the bed.*
 DOCTORS CREATE O.B.E.'S.

Ichabod jolts in his chair,
 waits for his TEST SUBJECT cheque. In *Elle*
 and *Cosmo*, the botoxed faces of models stare
 up from the page. Gone are the demoiselles
 and grand lashes of the Hollywood screen,
 the pinups of chorus girls.

In Niagara,
 in the 30's, the American Falls froze for fifteen
 days straight. (On the lawn, they play a game of paralysis).
 Men in black bowlers crossed the riverbed;
 MAN WALKS ON WATER, NEW YORK the headline read.

The headline read in bold, all caps: **DEAD!**
1928 New York's *Daily News*.
Electrocution of Ruth Snyder: head
in stiff helmet and mask. The Picture Newspaper.
In hose and flats strapped to the chair. The crime:
disfigurement with the weight of a window-sash.
After the burglary, Ruth refused to be untied
until the police arrived. Upstairs – a bashed-
in skull, a wire wound around its neck,
her husband's empty wallet and Ruth's jewels
(discovered stuffed under a mattress), a cheque
made out to her lover, Judd Gray, also ruled
for execution. Ruth's fidgeting hand,
the judge tapping his pen on the wig stand.

The judge tapping his pen on the wig stand
 is Ichabod. *Jury, the killer still exists.*
 Ichabod's fingernail pokes the wig stand
 on his desk. There is no trial. Ichabod knows this
 but still he continues to convict a body
 on a black horse lugging its head in its
 latched saddle bag. Ichabod pierces a bobby
 pin neatly into the styrofoam.

This is

the dream of the chase: a choker of black pearls
 shattered in the freight yard. Katrina's alone.
 Next to her cotton dress, a clump of curls.
 Her right arm thrown out fast to block the blow.
 A discarded object. Steam from the smokestacks
 beyond the bridge, a body by the tracks.

Beyond the bridge, the body on the tracks
belongs to the damsel swaddled in white, tied down
by the growling mustachioed villain in black.
Close up: the villain raising his eyebrows
in greedy anticipation. Card: *At last!*
The prize is mine! On the rails, the girl thrashes
in her ropes. Card: *Help! Help!* She is gagged
with the villain's ascot. Her fake lashes
do all the talking. Card: *Who will save me?*
A shot of the train – engine, piston, wheel.
A swirl of the cape. Card: *Please! Please!*
(The man inside the booth changes the reel).
Close up: the girl. In the breeze, a single thread.
The guillotine of a sunset barren of red.

The guillotine of a sunset bathed in red,
the horizon's blade at the end of the dock.
Ichabod prefers dawn. At the ocean's edge,
he stirs his drink with a celery stalk,
drawing attention away from his neckline
with a scooped tank and patterned bathing trunks.
Ichabod listens to the waves breaking
on the shore. Umbrella up and a bit drunk,
he dreams of young Katrina below a veil
she lifts to blow seeds from a hollow weed.
Her corset laces hold as she exhales,
white spores stick to the grass that licks her knees.

By the water, we can see children's hands
burying their victim beneath the sand.

The ostrich buries its head beneath the sand.
This is fiction. Ichabod knows and yet
he stops. A cartoon bird dances the cancan
poised in a feather bikini. Ichabod sets
his lukewarm dinner on the couch. He clicks
channels. A double exposed newscaster –
another murder. Ichabod adjusts the picture.
Men lift a body bag. A voice: *A plaster
mold of the jaw was used to identify
the deceased as 18 year old...
missing for over three weeks, a resident
of.... daughter of
At this time, the chief of police issues
this statement: the facts are uncertain. Now this.*

The facts are uncertain. Ichabod knows this.

Fact: a saddle trampled in dirt, the white
bark of a tulip tree, the neck's wishbone,
the clutch of a bodice, a body in flight
from 11.

Rotting leaves. Bludgeoned fruit. The spread
on mother's table – tubers, peas, a dry
bird (fact: does not scurry about *suns* head –
a mere series of spasms), pumpkin pie.
Ichabod's mum butters her son a roll.
Whatever happened to that nice Dutch girl?
(fact: she always asks this). Through a hole
in her throat, Aunt Lettie blows smoke. *The girl?*
Jesus, how many times, Ichabod's pop
starts the argument by the coffee pot.

Starting the argument by the coffee pot,
 the philosophy department's new hire who shares
 Ichabod's office begins, *one cannot
 be beheaded. The seat of consciousness? Upstairs.*
 He taps his forehead. *Hence, one can only be
 de-bodied.* (He always says this). *According to
 Descartes, I think therefore I am.* (Joe's Spleen).
*...Mind/body is an aspect of one – not two
 separate entities. Spinoza...*

Ichabod flips
 a coin, waits on the bench. The side of a bus:
 FREE HEAD SHOT. Model Search. All sizes and shapes
 for print and runway. Industry contacts. Must
 be 18. The face on Ichabod's wristband
 – we can see the sticking second hand.

We can see the sticking second hand.
 On the front yard, a child is melting. The last
 two children run 'til the chase ends – a hand
 held out (*who will save me?*). Run, run as fast
 as you can! Can't catch me, I'm the fox. Climb on
 my back; I will carry your head across
 the river.

We can see Ichabod's crown
 emerge – the doctor seals and cuts the cord.
 (In a red bonnet, in a bassinet).
 Sitting in a tree, k-i-s-s-i-n-g,
 I.C. + K.V.T. A little coquette
 in a neck brace (lolly and balloon) swings.
 Her hair ribbon catches a link of the chain.
 The sky looks blank and not at all like rain.

The sky looks blank and not at all like rain
breathing down a neck. (Run all you want).
Clawing at a fence, the hurrying maid
is bitten on the nose by a blackbird. (I won't
chase you). Inside the basket, a brown head
of lettuce. A clipping in Ichabod's wallet:
Katrina, bobby pin, left ear. Dead.
Fox-jawed. Her face looks blank and not at all
like it belongs in a box; her eyes open.
Ichabod's coattails sway above the seat
of his Gunpowder bike. He turns off-road.
The sound of hooves at his back, a creaking wheel.
The horseman tags a petrified figure – you're IT.
This is the dream of the body in flight.