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The University of Southern Mississippi

THE KNOWLEDGE WEAPON: WAYS OF KNOWING

by

Annette Christine Boehm

Abstract of a Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate School
of The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

May 2015

ABSTRACT

THE KNOWLEDGE WEAPON: WAYS OF KNOWING

by Annette Christine Boehm

May 2015

This collection of poems explores the language of knowledge and instruction. While it can provide a sense of security, what we are given as 'knowledge' is frequently unreliable or even misleading, and used much like a weapon.

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2015

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Annette Christine Boehm

A Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate School
of The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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May 2015

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INTRODUCTION

Experience and Knowledge

So much happens as pages are turned. In *The Friday Book*, John Barth explains that when a storyteller, a writer, goes to work, worlds are created. Learning to read opened up a galaxy of worlds for me. I learned to survive in the woods with *Ronia, Robber's Daughter*, saw the world from a kobold's perspective with *Pumuckl*, and walked the desert with the *Little Prince*. There was also the over-sized story book we had when I was a child, over 300 stories from around the world, colorfully illustrated. My sister and I read about the Minotaur, Calif Stork, and Ulysses' wise wife, Penelope. The stories taught us many things – how to outsmart Rumpelstiltskin, how to turn the Medusa to stone, how to find our way through a labyrinth, how to open the doors of heaven (with a magical chicken bone, or, failing that, with a severed finger), how to save cursed siblings (by knitting them shirts out of stinging nettles).

My grandparents owned a piece of land where plums, pears, and quinces grew. As a child I knew that quinces could be made into quince bread (somewhat like thick, soft fruit leather) which my mother cut into diamond shapes, and quince syrup, wonderfully sweet. One late summer day, after we had been picking plums all afternoon, my father lifted me up so I could pick one of the ripe quinces. The hard, sweet-smelling fruit looked like a misshapen pear and barely fit into my small hand. "Can I eat it right now?" He smiled encouragingly and I took a bite. Raw quince is extremely tart. This was his sort of practical joke.

Some years later, a friend asked me to help her with a math problem. It was an exercise that involved quarters and halves and wholes, and after some unsuccessful attempts at explaining, I went to the kitchen and got a knife and an apple. We cut the apple into halves, then quarters, and reassembled it. She instantly understood how to solve the problem.

Because we feel it with our hands, taste or smell it, hear or see it, experiential knowledge incorporates itself into our very bodies, so that once we have tasted a quince, even the thought of this fruit will cause a physical reaction. Once we link the abstract idea of $\frac{1}{4}$ to a quartered apple, fractions become tangible. Knowledge quite literally becomes part of us.

Language and Knowledge

There are risks to writing in a chosen language, but I have found that the benefits can outweigh these risks. My fluency in more than one language (and my relative familiarity with more than one culture) has helped shape my poetry because it has heightened my awareness of cultural idiosyncrasies as well as lexical connections between words and across languages. Language is an expression of culture; on a lexical level, it incorporates the beliefs and logics that underlie the community's mindset. A simple example would be the word *self-conscious*: in English, it means being unsure of oneself, whereas in German, the very same expression (translated literally: *selbstbewusst*) means being very sure of oneself. The underlying logic for German speakers is that knowing yourself means knowing your strengths, whereas for English speakers, it means knowing your own shortcomings.

On a higher level – the sentence level – language use also encodes social expectations and values. This is particularly evident in etiquette books and other instructional materials. Language changes constantly, and while the changes may be subtle, they are enough for us to, say, find humor and strangeness in the user instruction video for the 1982 Commodore computer. My poem, “How to Use the Commodore, 1982,” seeks to exploit the attitudinal and representational gaps that have arisen between the Commodore and today’s computer, such a commonplace item that the aggressive wonderment in the instruction video’s language seems misplaced:

He will do anything we say. He will do nothing
until we return. The place is address five three two eight oh.
He’ll change the place in memory to whatever we say.
Poke it and code it red. White. Blue. [...]
The commodore key is a new type of control. [...]
No need to write your own commands;
we’ve pre-collected bundles of orders
for you, for business, for special acts. Just insert
and turn on. He knows he is a new machine.

For contemporary audiences, phrases like “He will do anything we say” (taken directly from the video) evoke the image of a slave, or even a Robocop-style mechanized soldier in the service of the National Security Agency (“This is how we control our borders”). Our ways of talking about computers have changed with the introduction of user-

friendlier interfaces – no more need to know and write commands in DOS – and this changes how we hear the instructions: they sound militaristic to us, perhaps exposing a part of the machine’s identity and/or part of our own.

My poems often seek to capture very specific tones and uses of language with the goal of opening up and exploring (or in some cases exploding) the world they create. “Answers to Correspondents,” for example, draws from actual editor responses printed in *The Girl’s Own*, a Victorian magazine for girls. The language here, while usually benevolent and protective, is also consistently patronizing and at times scolding, if not threatening: “*Rose*, no gentleman would approach you without invitation” implies that Rose has acted inappropriately for her age and sex, and thus has invited men to pay her unwanted attention. Another girl is openly scolded: “*Colleen*, have you no maidenly reserve?” Isobel is told that her “quotation is very good, but useless”; Ethel is judged for her mediocre drawing skills.

The young women who wrote to the magazine wrote from a place of silence, a place where children – and especially girls – were to be seen, not heard. The relative anonymity of the “Answers” section (use of first names only, the actual letter never printed, and no locations given) gave them a space to speak, to ask questions. These girls lived in a culture of judgment where they were constantly on trial. This culture of judgment, this place of silence still exists for many women globally. The poem’s goal is to explore the responses to such a culture (resignation, obedience, anger) and what actions might result from these responses. As the poem progresses, it becomes clear that at least some of these girls are not sweet and simple but devious, even murderous, as if

the strictures placed on them have cultivated a kind of malaise that seeks to harm its makers.

Heliotrope, careful brushing with muriatic acid removes the surface of shells and bones. [...]

Gwendolyn can obtain alcohol from her chemist to permanently remove fingerprints.

Alternatively, she could wear gloves. [...]

Beatrice need not be nervous. Today, many women buy arsenic for use in the home.

Lottie is too young to need steels in her dresses. Hide the blade elsewhere.

Caustic soda may serve *Chloe* well.

A similar exploration of language worlds happens in “Susan Jane goes to Crystal Caverns,” “Hints for Deep Mourning,” “When to Raise Hat,” and “Dinner with Bob and Betty.” As Susan Jane gets ready for her night at the club, after having “found a book on what to do,” she knows she is going to be judged by her hair, her make-up, her posture. She knows she is expected to be quiet, smile and be pleasant:

Seal your lips with glue.

First of all, let them buy you a drink.

Remember posture. When the boys touch you

turn your spine into balsa wood. Lie

in their arms like a cello.

She is expected to communicate silently. Her clothing becomes an expression of her willingness to please, even surrender to the men at the club:

Make sure your hemline
echoes the blinds, your resolve a slinky
at the top of the stairs.

It is also her body that speaks: “Your physique determines how they do / or do not act,” explains the speaker to the young woman. While the location of Club Crystal Caverns (now known as Bohemian Caverns) in Washington, D.C. as well as other details (the Brilliantine hair) set the poem in the past, the observations made in the poem transcend that specific era, but are perhaps more visible because at a distance.

“Hints for Deep Mourning” draws from Victorian rules and customs for widows and the bereaved, but this setting can be read as a placeholder: mementoes made from hair, bones or teeth may seem strange to us, but we have our own specific customs for commemorating the death of a loved one. By removing us spatially, temporally, and culturally, this poem invites us to revisit such conventions and expectations. The poem “When to Raise Hat” pushes the language of convention and etiquette to the point where it fractures and breaks down:

A man raises his hat when addressed.
When walking with a man. When his companion.
With a woman, he lifts anyone the woman
greet. If he passes. Man, accompanied by woman, tilted

slightly forward, raises, whether he knows or not, his hat. [...]

Walking, he raises. His companion should be truly raised.

Man, when stopped by woman acquaintance,

should remove and remain. Bare. Until they part.

In this gesture, repeated ad nauseam, the hat and the woman finally become interchangeable, the meaning of the interaction half-forgotten. For this poem, I applied erasure to a book of manners, cutting away at the language to expose its bones, the scaffold of each sentence: imperatives, conditions, the occasional subject. Stripped of all non-essentials, the guide to etiquette begins to resemble the IF / THEN codes of conditional computer programs, leaving the subject quite literally as the processor, the one who follows pre-set processes.

“Dinner with Bob and Betty” is in part an erasure of the voice-over from the instructional film “Dinner Party Table Etiquette” (1945). Instead of fracturing the language, this poem plays up the peculiar attention to detail when it comes to table manners and entertaining:

Bob notices that the others have placed their celery differently.

Bob moves the celery from his service plate to the butter dish. [...]

Susan is breaking her celery. Steve is not concerned.

Betty is aware of the olive as a problem.

Is there a correct way to eat the olive?

I have a particular fascination with the language of the 1940s and '50s, "this troubled stage of our atomic lives," and the way it sometimes meshes benevolence and a sense of doom: "Dinner is for everyone to enjoy, but you must know the rules," states the narrator of the poem, a direct quote from the film. The dangers implied in the source materials, of social embarrassment and a failed dinner party, accelerate in the poem.

Whereas the film's dinner party is fairly uneventful, my poem's speaker urges Bob and Betty to prepare for a real emergency ("What if a siren sounds? It is impolite / to show you have noticed.") and finally suggests there are specific etiquette rules for cannibalism: "What serving implements should Bob use to serve Susan? / Do not place her on the tablecloth where she might stain." In an age where nuclear holocaust looms even over the dinner table (and "holocaust" literally means the burning of all), where homeowners are urged to build their own fallout shelters, this adjustment of etiquette is merely an extension of the ominous mindset already contained in the language of 1945 dinner party conventions.

In my poems I explore the worlds created by language that is specific, be it to an era, a geographic context, social contexts such as occupations, or linguistic contexts such as that of science. This manuscript is unified both by this approach and by the underlying sense that what is presented to us as knowledge, as vital information, is often anything but. This knowledge can be a weapon to those who deploy it, and a trap to those who receive it. The young women who turn to *The Girls' Own* for guidance and answers are not so much told 'truths' as conventions to follow and social expectations they are to meet. Like them, Susan Jane, who turns to a book to know what to do at the club, is given

answers that protect the answerer's sense of her own identity. Any "help" they may provide is purely incidental.

Recently I have become deeply interested in the history of the personal, an idea that is very much rooted in my conviction that experiential knowledge matters. Growing up with four generations of family around me, I have tried to piece together the experiences that have shaped my relatives, females in particular. In addition to the stories told by elders, there were also stories that were (at times actively) omitted. Some of the poems in this collection engage with these stories; "Dear Hilda," for example, is written as a letter from my paternal grandmother. When her husband decided to realize his dream of moving to Canada, she suddenly found herself in Vancouver, isolated from her many siblings, and unable to work because she didn't speak English.

My grandmother had a distinct way of speaking, with a penchant for exactness that may have carried over from her girlhood training and employment creating large-scale technical drawings. She could not abide a crooked line. She was also parsimonious in her writing, so I knew that the poem needed to be short. My grandmother was quite domestic, in keeping with her generation. She spent much time in the kitchen, cutting onions, peeling potatoes and apples, and that part of her life would remain the same no matter where she was, hence her observation that "Apples peel the same way here." The images in the poem come in part from my memories of her (the blue shirts, the closeness to her sister), and in part from the few stories she would volunteer about the time in Canada (the pancakes, and feeding the neighborhood children along with her own). I've also added impressions my father shared from that period of his life, particularly the

awkward history lessons: “The teacher makes them / leave the room when the lesson is war.” So that economy could be eloquent, it was important to choose only those images that most captured her experience of displacement.

“Steeling” is also a family poem. My mother’s mother became a widow when her three children were still very young, so she found outside work. As a butcher, she spent each afternoon and evening making sausages, and sold her goods at local markets from the small hours of the morning until noon. Even when she had grandchildren, her work was still very much part of her life. I remember the sound of the blade against the textured sharpening steel, and watching her “lift, slice / silverskin, cut sinews and fat.” There wasn’t a blunt knife in my grandmother’s household; she sharpened her knives regularly, whether they were used for her work as a butcher or in her own small kitchen. In order to get the tone right for this poem, I researched the language of meat and butchery. Even though only a few of the terms I found made it into the final version of the poem, I think they help create the voice.

Here is the sharpening steel. Here is
the angle of the blade. Your thumb
on the spine. Here is the motion,
smooth and even, from heel to point.
Left, right, you count to twelve.
Left, right, the strokes of boar bristle.
You make me count to one hundred,

for shine. The back of your hand, cool
against my neck.

The sudden move from blade to bristle is intended to conflate the two, softening the potential danger of the blade and infusing the triviality of the brush with tension, a sense of vulnerability. Both the sharpening steel and the boar bristle hair brush are strongly tied to my childhood memories: visits to Grandmother's always involved vigorous hair-brushing, something I did not enjoy but had little say about.

The poem "Elizabeth" focuses on a family story that was largely withheld – maybe in an effort to protect my sister and me from its harshness: My great-grandaunt had a clubfoot because of polio, and under the Nazi regime, "cripples" were not allowed to have children. She was forcibly sterilized. When she became pregnant nonetheless, her child was aborted. Shortly thereafter, her husband was shot by Russian soldiers. As a child I felt frightened of her because she seemed such a bitter woman. I wish that I had known her story.

It has taken me a long time to find the right constellation of words for this poem, and I have lost track of the number of versions it has gone through over the years. Elisabeth always held back when it came to talking about the past, keeping this particular story a secret until shortly before her death. I wanted to preserve this reluctance in the tone of the poem by circumscribing rather than obviously stating what happens. This led to the decision to describe her as "no Pavlova" rather than simply a woman with a crippled foot.

Blanket-scape, white, mostly flat.

Two points, one awkward, mark her feet.

Polio meant more than No Pavlova:

Her pelvis' cupped hands,

aware they are empty

hold on to the shadow of joy.

To obedient uniforms, it was just

an order to abort. A handful of flesh.

Bony shoulders, a sinewy neck,

a speckled face, vague halo of hair.

Nothing, nothing moves.

The starkness of the poem, the relative lack of sentimental involvement in what is a shocking and heartbreaking event, felt right to me because it, too, fit with her personality.

“Stillborn (1918)” reaches further back, into the childhood memories of my great-grandmother. In her last year, the present and the past became increasingly meshed, and one day she told me about something she had seen as a young girl. At that moment, she was the young girl, and she had just seen this, and she needed to share. I knew the speaker for the poem needed to be the young girl herself. In order to create that voice, I chose relatively simple language.

Our house silent, windows

boarded over, breath

held, we pried

with small hands, as spies, for a crack.

The short sentence segments in the first stanza capture the speaker's uncertainty whether her experience can be put into words, and maybe even whether it should be. The school dresses as well as the explanation that "we could not allow the world to be in color" situate the poem in a sepia-toned past, while the boarded up windows imply destruction, possibly war. The complexity of the last sentence redirects the reader's attention from the gruesomeness of the scene to the girl's response to it. This is an important move in order to keep the horror in the poem from being gratuitous:

I wanted to kiss her for being

alive, with me, in the attic confine.

Echoes and Influences

My poetic aesthetic is informed by the work of Marianne Moore and Elizabeth Bishop. Both poets place great value on truthfulness and exactness, in some cases spending years (and countless revisions) on finding just-right sets of adjectives. Bishop's poetry in particular has many traits I seek to emulate. In addition to being very alert to visual detail (take, for example, the powerful descriptions found in "The Fish" or "At the Fishhouses"), she is also an acute observer of emotion and relationships. This shows, for example, in the affective complexity and depth of poems like "First Death in Nova Scotia," "Invitation to Miss Marianne Moore," "The Filling Station," or "The Waiting Room." At the surface, these poems are deceptively simple, while below the surface there is much to explore. In "The Filling Station," the description of a stop at a run-down gas

station brings the speaker to an unexpected, hopeful conclusion. At first glance, the place is not at all welcoming:

Oh but it is dirty!

This little filling station,

oil-soaked, oil-permeated

to a disturbing, over-all

black translucency. (Bishop 125)

The poem takes us closer and closer to the scene as the speaker approaches and notices more and more details: a plant, a wicker couch, a sleeping dog, comic books, a doily, oil cans carefully, deliberately arranged. There is a sense of verisimilitude; it is as if we, too, were stepping onto the premises and taking the place in as we go. In an elegant move, Bishop's speaker derives the presence of some benevolent being from the very absence of the hands who takes care of the station:

Somebody embroidered the doily.

Somebody waters the plant,

or oils it, maybe. Somebody

arranges the rows of cans

so that they softly say:

ESSO-SO-SO-SO

to high-strung automobiles.

Somebody loves us all. (Bishop 125)

There is a sense of tenderness, but it is balanced by humor and a certain detachment that keep the poem from becoming sentimental. The gas station patron is credible: she takes in what anyone would, and while the distance between getting gas and contemplating the existence of God (or another benevolent force in the Universe) is big, the speaker's thoughts cover that distance without becoming abstract or esoteric. In my own writing, I aim for the sense of subtlety and verisimilitude Bishop saw as a vital necessity in her work. My poem "Saturday Nights with Mary" attempts a similar technique, guiding the reader through the scene by means of detailed description, to arrive at a larger realization. Whereas Bishop's speaker in "The Filling Station" provides an increasingly narrow focus, the speaker attention of my poem's speaker initially moves outward from her body:

Flushed from being scrubbed, we sit in clean pyjamas,
the stiff fabric, the couch bristling against bare feet.

To the left, the door with its crucifix crown;
to the right, the painting of an elk roaring

As the the poem progresses, the focus expands to embrace first the grandmother, then the television, and finally locks on to Mary, the star of the show.

Another powerful influence is the work of Dylan Thomas. I greatly admire his sense of sound and melody, his strong rhythms. Read aloud, for example, these sections from "And Death Shall Have No Dominion":

Dead men naked they shall be one

With the man in the wind and the west moon;

When their bones are picked clean and their clean bones gone
They shall have stars at elbow and foot;
Though they go mad they shall be sane,
Though they sink through the sea they shall rise again
[...]
Faith in their hands shall snap in two,
And the unicorn evils run them through;
Split all ends up, they shan't crack;
And death shall have no dominion. (Thomas 73)

Clearly, the word choice here was heavily influenced by how the sounds of the individual words interact with each other, and this makes Thomas's poetry a pleasure to listen to and recite. This preoccupation with the sonic leads to unexpected pairings of words, such as "the unicorn evils" and "the man in the wind and the west moon." Thomas' work has taught me that it is important for my poems to "sound right" – not just on the page or in a reader's head, but when read aloud. To achieve this, I sound out my poems as I write. At times, my writing process even begins with sound, something misheard, or a turn of phrase and how it catches my ear. "The Physicist Writes Home, March 1953" is a poem where a focus on sound allowed for a good deal of playfulness:

Darling, you asked about transition: It is nothing.
It is Germanium, the sixth of a cigarette,
the width of julienne carrots, a thin slice of liver.

In this poem, I use phrases from the science section of a 1950s science fiction magazine (particularly a piece about the workings of transistors) but replace most nouns with other, more interesting sounding ones.

I would like to mention Jenny Bouilly as another influence on my writing: Her hybrid work encouraged me to examine my own notions of how texts should work. Bouilly's *The Body* blindsided me in a pleasant way; it consists exclusively of footnotes (some of which have their own footnotes), challenging the reader to fill in the actual body of the book. "Corrections, Concerning Midas" is the result of my attempts at a similar form. Even though I ended up not keeping the footnote format, the spirit of challenging the reader's notions of text is, I hope, still evident in the poem:

He took to carrying a wren's bone in his left hand

He turned his eyes, breaking the convex, the concave mirrors

Not mirrors, the wall between him and birth.

Not a bone, a photograph. Not broken, burnt.

The corrections in the poem are extreme; they radically change the narrative to the point where either the original text or the corrections must lose all credibility. In a final turn, the corrections turn not only on the source story, but on themselves:

He laid eighty-seven eggs, and left his breath.

Not eggs, but himself. Not eighty-seven, one

and its shadows, which he hid under an electric blanket.

Not under a blanket, in the membranes

and underneath his feet.

This poem encapsulates the sense of knowledge exposed as either useless or untrue that permeates this manuscript, a sense of knowledge as manufactured and deployed like a weapon.

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PUBLICATION NOTES

“Corrections, Concerning Midas” first appeared in *The Nassau Review*.

“A is for Atom – An Instructional Film (1952)” and “Burke’s Handbook of Beauty” first appeared in the *Hawaii Pacific Review*.

“Stillborn (1918)” first appeared in *Barely South Review*.

“Acts of Volition” first appeared in *New Welsh Review*.

THE KNOWLEDGE WEAPON

Steeling

The chainmail glove on the raw red chunk.
Even the walls are tiled. You lift, slice
silverskin, cut sinews and fat. You see me.
“Watch,” you say, “This is how it’s done.”
Here is the sharpening steel. Here is
the angle of the blade. Your thumb
on the spine. Here is the motion,
smooth and even, from heel to point.
Left, right, you count to twelve.
Left, right, the strokes of boar bristle.
You make me count to one hundred,
for shine. The back of your hand, cool
against my neck. You used to have a doll
with porcelain cheeks. You dress me
as one of your own.

Executioner

When a bee enters the room, hide all the knives
you haven't used. You will have visitors. Kill the bee.

Light three joints with the same match. Of three people
in a photograph, the one in the middle always dies first.

There is no point in closing the windows; someone is
walking on your grave. Death is a swan's feather

sewn into your chest. Eat sorrow like almonds.

Dream of gloves, then take up taxidermy.

Wrap all your mirrors in gauze.

Carroll Stops Fogging the Mirror

You act like all is
fine, each word you adorned
me with, each little sanity you shared
with the faces in the mirror.

You made her public, the girl
that was me, and you wonder

why your little boy wonder
killed himself. It wasn't malice.
Like a stammer he'd hurl
himself at me, adore
me like I was his mirror,
like we shared

a surface. Now only a shard
is left, as I wander
outside the mirror,
much too tall. Is
there anything left you adore?
No longer a girl,

I've escaped the glass, hurled
myself through the thorns. Mon cher,
you've opened the door
for my lanky, wonder-
ful malice.

I can't smile at mirrors

any more. Mirrors
glomming bloodless girls
who do as they're told, all as
your lens caresses; hard,

they want to be the wonder
the plate, the print you adore.

My blood adorns
my hands, the attic mirror
where I wandered,
a laughing, keening girl
parchment-skinned, scarred
with malice:

The one you adored, a whirl-
wind of mirrors, this shard
your wonder, your Alice.

My Boy Sherlock

The boy with the puppy-dog eyes tells me
he knows what's behind the wall-papered door
our grandmother always keeps locked.
It's where she's hidden the body, it's where
our granddad is. She's stored him standing
upright in his Sunday suit, and hidden the key.
Palm-sized, dusty sunflowers cover the cracks
but grubby fingers have peeled
the paper off the lock to look. It's just dark.
When the heavy hoover is running, the air
vibrates bare ribs, shuffles toe bones in the
black leather shoes. Bats live in that chest.
What we need, the boy says, is a skeleton key.

The Homemaker's Rain Dance

Go right now, layer the house with books.
Sixteen inches for ample shielding.
Accidents are happening
everywhere to everyone;
it's a wonderful time to be alive.

Fallout: a light dust. Wipe it off.
Scrub and peel inanimate objects.
They will be perfectly safe to eat.
They are too small to hurt you.

Locate salve, powdered milk,
a hammer. Get on the floor.
The State Orchestra's Conelrad rendition
will continue
for an hour or so.

The Physicist Writes Home, March 1953

Darling, you asked about transition: It is nothing.
It is Germanium, the sixth of a cigarette,
the width of julienne carrots, a thin slice of liver.

And how it works: Its theory involves holes. Space.
Picture buttermilk pancakes. Insensible
to shock, to violence, its virtues cheap

substitute for muscles and mind.
Have you tried those TV dinners? The military
is growing concerned. Every thinking person

launched from the belly of a B-29. Funeral potatoes.
I observe humans in free fall. Think of aspic salad.
Gravity seems improbable, deceptive.

Burke's Handbook on Beauty

First, be small. A greenfly,
the tip of a finger, a hypodermic needle.
Be smooth. Sealskin, a lisp, a slip,
the freshly-waxed hood of a cop car.

Have variety in your parts.
Slingshots, hedgehogs, shoulder blades.
Not angular, but melted into each other.
Knuckles, sporks, a tapered mohawk.

Be delicate, with no appearance of strength.
Stonewash your birthmarks. Sand off
your animal hair. Keep the tones clear and light.
Pastel scrubs, powdered latex gloves,

if the colour is glaring, diversify it.
Old ladies' curls. Correctly pinched cheeks.
Lauper your elf owl eyes.

Stillborn (1918)

Our house silent, windows
boarded over, breath
held, we pried
with small hands, as spies, for a crack.

The neighbors borne from their house
limp, delivered like meat
half a pig on a man's shoulder:
The pale-faced boy.
The dad was big, took two
to carry, one hand trailing –

Two girls in school dresses, hair undone from play
we could not allow the world to be in colour.
I wanted to kiss her for being
alive, with me, in the attic confine.

Answers to Correspondents (*The Girl's Own*, 1886)

Isobel, your quotation is very good, but useless.

To *Ursula* we suggest a rosary wash. This may be used on the whole body.

Our article "Lissome Hands and Pretty Feet" answers *Saffron's* questions.

Heliotrope, careful brushing with muriatic acid removes the surface of shells and bones. *Colleen*, have you no maidenly reserve?

Corisande, the soul does not attain its highest state until reunited with the body.

Gwendolyn can obtain alcohol from her chemist to permanently remove fingerprints.

Alternatively, she could wear gloves.

Rose, no gentleman would approach you without invitation.

Our opinion of *Ethel's* chalk drawing is not favorable. The body's outline is too simple.

Beatrice need not be nervous. Today, many women buy arsenic for use in the home.

Lottie is too young to need steels in her dresses. Hide the blade elsewhere.

Caustic soda may serve *Chloe* well. She should ask her governess to help her.

Dinner with Bob and Betty. A Science Film for Young Americans.

At this troubled stage of our atomic lives, we must be alert.
See if you notice right away when someone is incorrect.
Should Betty have preceded her guests into the room?
Steve and Susan are quite certain how to unfold their napkins.
Betty has doubts of her correctness. Bob is hungry.
He is doing at least three things wrong.
Wait your turn, Bob. What if a siren sounds? It is impolite
to show you have noticed. Soup is eaten quietly from the side
of the spoon. Should Betty have passed the cracker dish?
A spoon left standing in a cup is a trap.

Dinner is for everyone to enjoy, but you must know the rules.
Bob notices that the others have placed their celery differently.
Bob moves the celery from his service plate to the butter dish.
He is projecting the blame to the celery.
Susan is breaking her celery. Steve is not concerned.
Betty is aware of the olive as a problem.
Is there a correct way to eat the olive?
Bob should use his knife for cutting instead of tearing.
Never use your butter spreader for opening.
What serving implements should Bob use to serve Susan?
Do not place her on the tablecloth where she might stain.

Here Is Your Childhood

Please accept this spirit
bottle as our gift.
Inside, the extracted specimen
has been carefully preserved.
Formalin may cause slight
hardening, changes in color,
perfect for such a soft body.
We've cut it wide open to show
it is constructed, like an egg,
of two concentric spheres.

The outside is synthetic
blue as you stomp through
anthills on a red dare, unscared,
run after him, into the under
growth, – you're his,
you're the wild one, you both
piss into the ravine.

Night comes with berry stains
on your shirt, your shorts
muddy, your knees black and glue
on your hands, arms marked
by brambles, lost ballpoint pens.

Inside, the smell of your father's
repair shop, of soldering irons,
dust and grease and circuit boards
in a jungle of crates, blind vacuum
tubes and purple tins that clank, ready
to spill screws. You sit, tailor style,
between drips of lead
on the linoleum. Thirsty,
you reach out and drink.

a Bird, a Plane, a Man

Undocumented immigrant from the stars
with your spit-curl, your small-town charm
you can't sit still. Metropolis marvels

at your blinding smile in the crosshairs
while power-suited men trade arms,
undocumented. Immigrant from the stars,

blue-eyed, all-American boy, you race
along your paper route, respond to each alarm
throughout the still metropolis. Marvels

like you have been placed on altars,
the pure, strange fruit of some farm's
undocumented immigrant. From the stars

fall laws like heaven's handlebars,
batons, bright in the hands of a gendarme
who paces the still metropolis, marvels

at mild-mannered hearts turned into pulsars,
brand new drones that swarm
undocumented immigrants, the stars
and stripes perfectly still. Metropolis marvels.

Dear Hilda,

What keeps me is the chattering of children
around the pale blue table. Everything is pale blue.
The shirts he buys me, the milk, the sky. I feed
the neighbors' boys and girls apple pancakes.

Our children play outside. The teacher makes them
leave the room when the lesson is war.

I learn words.

Apple, sugar, syrup, eat.

More? All full up.

The children say Thank you and run.

Horst's name made people laugh, so he changed
it to Ginger. All day, he picks up broken
TV sets and radios, fixes them, takes them back.
Business is going well, he says.

Apples peel the same way here. The same
slight resistance to the blade, the same
bruises, the same star-shaped core.

Personal Effects

One left leather glove, black.
Four hand-knitted cardigans, grey, wool.
One jar kosher dills, economy size.
Three tins smoked oysters.
One can-opener, blunt. The smell of liverwurst.
Eight storage crates of classical LPs. Three crates of Sixties pornographic magazines.
Nineteen lungfuls Russian snow, 1943.
One violin, two strings. Three Victor mouse traps, unused.
One glass eye, blue. Twenty-three broken TV sets. One photograph, black and white, shows young woman smiling. Three long, white hairs in a blush plastic brush. One receipt for lopping shears.
Two bags labeled Caustic Soda, empty.
One opera ticket for *Salome*, mezzanine.
One first-aid kit without Band-Aids.

Acts of Volition

1, 3 and 5 are loitering at the bus-stop.
If they look your way, walk faster, then run.
You choose to stop for chips on the way to 19.
If you drink her warm Stella, 19 takes you
to a strip club where you bump into 11
whose lover ditched him for another choice.
At the club, 7 is dressed as a sailor. 7 grinds
polyester against warm steel. Choose if 19
has had too much. If 19 is an angry drunk. Choose
if 7 stays cool. If you couldn't care less. If
the bouncer kicks you out as well. If you choose
to leave. In the street, 11 is waiting to meet 21.
11 is waiting. 11 wants to introduce you to Elvis
who now lives near Clapham Common.
You ask 11 for a smoke. It's his last one.
If you take it. Elvis swears at you. Elvis
doesn't swear at you. Elvis takes a swing at you.
Elvis thanks you very much.
7 appears. She wants Elvis to walk her home.
Choose if she's pissed. Choose if she wants to talk,
if she wants to throw up, if she wants to fuck.
Choose if they get into a fight.
Which isn't a fight. Which is. An accident.
An experiment gone wrong. A turn.

The Knowledge Weapon

This is what will happen: At the right moment, a plate will be brought to you. On top of the plate is a doily. On top of the doily is a small glass bowl, half-filled with water. Inside, there may be a lemon slice. There may be a flower, floating. Take brief notice of this.

You dip one hand at a time, quickly, unobtrusively, swishing your fingertips. Moving your hand to your lap, you draw your fingers across the cloth of your napkin. Now move bowl and doily to your left, counting three regular breaths. Remain seated and wait. Face the prophets.

The Ideal Bartender

Zoot suits crave his Bourbon blessings, his mighty servitude. Dedicated to those who enjoy snug club rooms, he prepares for them what is good. Brandy Skin, Sling and Smash. Punch. All bitters

and servitude, he's dedicated to those who enjoy Delusion, calls for lime and Creme de Menthe. Branded, skinned, slung and smashed. Bitter. Free Love Cocktail (Anisette & Old Tom Gin)

and Delusion, called for, lying with the men shimmying from tumbler to hi-ball to shot glass. Free Love! Cocks in tails, any old Tom with a Cooler or a Fizz, a Stinger, Stone Sour,

crushed ice, bruised mint tumbling to shots, zoot suits bleeding Bourbon, his mighty blessings of cool, of smoke. Smooth as the bar he towers in snug club rooms, he will prepare for you. Good.

Susan Jane Goes to Crystal Caverns

You've fixed up your hair, you have on a pretty dress.
You've even found a book on what to do.
This is your chance, Susan Jane.
When you enter the bar, don't draw attention
to your stubby fingers. Seal your lips with glue.
First of all, let them buy you a drink.
Remember posture. When the boys touch you
turn your spine into balsa wood. Lie
in their arms like a cello. Make sure your hemline
echoes the blinds, your resolve a slinky
at the top of the stairs. Leave your mother's ashes
at home. Your physique determines how they do
or do not act. They smell of brass and sweat.
You have on a pretty dress. They have pressed shirts
and slacks. Smile through the smoke. Slide
through their Brilliantine hair.

A is for Atom – An Instructional Film (1952)

A giant of limitless power, at man's command.
We found him in the head of a pin. In a pincushion.
In a sewing basket. In ships and shoes and ceiling wax
and cabbages and cranes.

Neutrons are crab apples stuck in cosmic glue.
Isotopes are siblings and spouses.
Tin is the old woman who lived in shoe; aluminum
a bachelor with a fridge full of leftovers. Radium
dances all night to shrill jazz. She is a little kid
on speed. Shaking Protons. Letting her hair down.
Changing suits, shoes, hats, tails,
going to bed with a different face.

The Uraniums dance, their jigs not quite matching, and
finally, they blow a fuse. Their breakup wakes up
the whole block. They have found a solvent for the ties
that bind flesh to flesh, birds to a feather, storks to one another.
Words travel, a wildfire, a ping-pong ball in a land
of mouse traps. A million billion billion lovers
split up within two seconds.

This is far from impossible. It could happen
in locomotives, submarines, large airplanes.
Think atomic escalators. It would take the entire
Yankee Stadium filled with dynamite
to create the same measure of commotion.

Hints For Deep Mourning

The entire costume to be either black.

Satin, lace or velvet not in good taste.

Clothes must be dull materials, such as crepe
dull-finish silk, or wool.

Long veils as protection worn only until

Month's Mind. Preference to be given to cambric
handkerchiefs. Gloves must be kidskin.

Invest in appropriate jewelry: Black amber, jet.

Save curls for lockets and bracelets

of knotted hair, teeth to be polished as pearls

or pendants, children entirely white. Bones

to carve into rings, to prepare for second mourning.

Take Your Son, Sir (after Ford Madox Brown)

I forget the corners of my mouth
my eyes, my bedlamite cast

but this is worth keeping:
This is moist, ruddy, fidgety
all fingers and fat;

this is pappy under hand,
head to toe, a snug suit of skin.

His gelatinous eyes fixed on you
who smells of linseed and sugar

of lead. My arms tire –
take your son.

The Land of Live Dolls

Then the Gardener, for it was he,
showed her the trees
of undergarments and dear little petticoats,
the bushes of different colored stockings.
Lost, she watched the vests
and panties dance in the breeze,
the stockings nodding their consent,
her lap full of this vision.

The Gardener told her to pick
whichever she wanted, they were all hers:
slips trimmed with Battenburg lace,
grace-filled corsets, babydolls –

When he led her back to the house
legs and arms were being replaced; the blind
were made to see with blue eyes and black,
the yard full of girls, weeping.

Corrections, Concerning Midas

And Midas was given this, that all he touched would turn

Not gold, but static. Not static, newsprint.

Bench, bed, bare feet,

bread, wine and toothpaste, all were

Not transformed, created. Not constructed, found.

And Midas cried to his Lord and made sacrifice

Not a lamb, a cygnet. Not a swan, a wolf.

He took to carrying a wren's bone in his left hand

He turned his eyes, breaking the convex, the concave mirrors

Not mirrors, the wall between him and birth.

Not a bone, a photograph. Not broken, burnt.

And Midas heard his wife's voice in the next room and ran

Until he reached a great body.

He laid eighty-seven eggs, and left his breath.

Not eggs, but himself. Not eighty-seven, one

and its shadows, which he hid under an electric blanket.

Not under a blanket, in the membranes

and underneath his feet.

Stella to Astrophil

My solar system still consists of nine planets, and the Kuiper belt that keeps us all inside this giant centrifuge.

Let's catalogue the universe together and waste no time on petty definitions – who cares if Pluto doesn't fit the bill.

There is no point in looking for a cosmos full of ornamental worlds; here's chaos, fuzzy logic, quantum seizures, stars that sputter, fluctuate and say no grace.

Just past these gas clouds, out of earshot, comets don their vinyl wrestling masks, hurl insults left and right like shards of ice until they're spent, cut grooves into the dark with methane and ammonia pocket knives, know better than bespectacled old men and you and I, we both know they are right.

When to Raise Hat

As a gesture of politeness, a man raises his hat.

The hat should be very slightly tilted forward.

A man raises his hat when greeting a woman he knows.

A man raises his hat when addressed.

When walking with a man. When his companion.

With a woman, he lifts anyone the woman

greet. If he passes. Man, accompanied by woman, tilted slightly forward, raises, whether he knows or not, his hat.

Tilted. A gesture, slightly forward.

Walking, he raises. His companion should be truly raised.

Man, when stopped by woman acquaintance, should remove and remain. Bare. Until they part.

The woman should request. Replace. If weather. Very cold. Otherwise unpleasant.

Elisabeth

Blanket-scape, white, mostly flat.
Two points, one awkward, mark her feet.
Polio meant more than No Pavlova:
Her pelvis' cupped hands,
aware they are empty
hold on to the shadow of joy.

To obedient uniforms, it was just
an order to abort. A handful of flesh.
Bony shoulders, a sinewy neck,
a speckled face, vague halo of hair.
Nothing, nothing moves.

Shortwave Sleeper

Numbers stations amplify the empty room at night.
Counting up from one to nine, again, and again.
Eleven words. A small tribe of voices seeking
each other in the dark.
Each sequence ends on zero.

A distorted ice cream tune.
A nameless child calling air to attention.

When I was nameless, I had a radio so small
it fit into my two hands
at night. I heard Moscow. I heard
the atmospheric hiss of miles and miles of air, called
to attention. I was safe under covers,
one finger on the frequency.

Putting My Head Together

My cowlicks, left and right, earned me a nickname:
Bringer of Dissent. My hair was a matter
of grave discussion between my mother and aunts.
Every fortnight, my great-grandmother fought her sister
over who deserved it more.
Her sister gave me a brush with pig's bristles
and they watched every stroke
until my hair flew with static.
Her sister wore a wig called Fifi, which she,
when tipsy, would threaten to take off,
but never did. From all this, I knew,
when I grew up, I'd be respected,
no, celebrated for my hair. Wars would break out
over who could cut it, who might own it,
and when I died, it would have its own shrine.
We'd have to convert to Catholicism, of course,
but that should be easy:
Grandma always tipped the priest.

This outdated future –

Tuck it back into the particular spaces.
Where you found it. Let's pretend it
never happened, and I never learned to count –

One's a deviation, an unexpected rain.
Twos: anomalies, two yolks in one egg.
Threes, incidents, are no reason to duck.
Fours have consequences: one of us has to die.
Five's accident is the talk of the town.
Sixes reach past Metropolis.
Sevens eat Belarus and Japan.

How to Use the Commodore, 1982

He will do anything we say. He will do nothing
until we return. The place is address five three two eight oh.
He'll change the place in memory to whatever we say.
Poke it and code it red. White. Blue.
This is how we control our borders.
We can choose the color of characters individually.
We can choose their background; these things
are in the book if you go looking.
The commodore key's a new type of control.
Easy to use, fully intuitive if
you've done this work before. We know you have.
No need to write your own commands;
we've pre-collected bundles of orders
for you, for business, for special acts. Just insert
and turn on. He knows he is a new machine.

The Healing Cascade

After the spill, I clot like cream.
I bolt the door, duplicate
my heart, split down the middle.

Inflammation – I eat what eats me.
I mop the red floor, chase your lies
down capillary drains.

Reaching out with both arms,
I pull the curtains left and right.
Skin rises spongy, raw and new.

Finally, the calculated death:
with pinking shears I trim lightning
nerves, re-weave myself
along tension lines.

Greater Noctule

Tonight my body is shedding me,
or the opposite is true:

I'm loosening my hair, my skin,
my bones thin as a bat's.

I meant to say
my heart is a geiger counter.
Drumbeats contract into ticks;

where is your echo, your radium face?
Where are you, songbird,
my sweet passerine?

Tallying

People in New Guinea count body parts,
from thumb to torso to opposite hand.
This gives them twenty seven single digits.
Others in the same place have
only “one” and “two” to count all things.

The numbers I learned to draw are Arabic.
Because of our grandfather clock
I can count to twelve in Roman numerals.

It is possible to express numbers up to
one thousand twenty three using a binary
system and two hands.

Five nights a week, Victoria displaces coins
to avoid counting any more than once.
This works for finite sets only, because
Victoria is finite. She is forty three.
On a paper napkin, she tallies Shillings.

Weathering the Storm

Why does it have to rain on my birthday,
my wedding day, the day I fall in love?
I stay a fish in the synaptic net
I should be a fisherman's wife
waiting for the day to land on my table, and
with one swift move I'd chop off its head.

Saturday Nights with Mary

Flushed from being scrubbed, we sit in clean pyjamas,
the stiff fabric, the couch bristling against bare feet.
To the left, the door with its crucifix crown;
to the right, the painting of an elk roaring
in a clearing. We are quiet, with the lights off, with Great-grandma
dozing in the embroidered chair, the Technicolor
warm like a fireplace. Grandma is a floating face, her eyes
trained on the curvaceous blonde on the screen.
The sequins, the diamond-bright earrings, the silver dress
slit part-way up her thigh – so tight she can only stand
or half sit on a stool as she talks and smokes and sings.
Mary is a regular in the brocaded sitting room.
When she repeats herself she's still welcomed with open arms.
And when, finally, she takes off her jewels and makeup,
steps down from bright heels and lets her silver slip,
Grandma takes a deep breath. Mary takes off her wig,
her voice breaks. She is a thin, balding man.
She looks straight into the camera, watches Grandma cry.

Posing at William H. Mumler's

Tell me how to sit. And where.
Here's the prayer book, a lock of her hair
between the Easter liturgies.
Yes, this is the dress I wore, and my braids
like they were, and a satin bow.
Should I hold my breath? I worry
I might scatter her. Where should I look?
Will you tell me when she's here?
Can you see –
Of course. We have to wait
for the plates. The baptism
of light in silver salt. Tell me, is she
crying? Are her eyes closed or open?
Why is she looking at you?

System Maintenance

See, these blocky bugs that swarm around you
are nothing but compression artifacts.

Say they're love bugs. They're harmless.
My brain adds dither to your surfaces
to compensate for generation loss.

Your cheek luke warm like dusty motherboards.

Glitched, grainy, simplified. Your eyes
down to four unnatural shades of green,
your heart a single square of red in Teletext.

I defragment my mind:
What's undefined will be deleted.

Slough

I carried my grandmother's body to the shifting city, set it down with the cardboard boxes outside the terminal. It sighed like a coat, sunk by my feet. The station shuddered behind me. Rubbed with light, left and right, new buildings were breaking through the tarmac like teeth. Shoots of steel and safety glass quivered out of a sewer, then slithered past. The cardboard had melted on the city's tongue, and my shoes were getting absorbed. You understand, I had to keep moving. I left the body. In peripheral vision, a cold, stale rubber glove.

A Lesson for Acute Boys and Girls

Have a black cat in the audience on opening night
fasten a horse-shoe near the door for good-luck
throw salt over the shoulder
be glad to have first seen the moon
sad to be sitting thirteen at the table;
turn twice before setting out a second time
believe that the gift of a crooked sixpence
betokens good fortune, that of a knife, bad;
that killing a swallow will give cows bloody milk
that crossing your stockings before going to bed
insures happy dreams, that work started on a Friday
is unlucky, that "Bless you" tucks your soul back in
never count the number of people at a funeral
or put a dime in your shoe – all are
as to lay food before an idol of wood,
to bury bow and arrows with a dead warrior.

Slash Pine Grove, Mississippi

It's the little things. Pine needles
brush against brick. Roots
move slightly in the loam, untie
alluvial braids, let the loess shudder.
The saplings and dryads are restless,
giddy with anticipation and fear.
Their fine hair senses heat, traces sweat,
skin cells in footprints that lead
to tire tracks. A crude taste of rubber.
It is time. They lower their arms;
branches shed moss and lichen.
They reach out. The strangler fig
has taught them how this is done.

Living with the Atom (1957)

God may be a solid, a liquid,
or a gas. He's almost entirely
empty space. A silvery-white
metal. The source of every bit
of power in the universe. It is
possible to release God's energy:
we merely have to split his heart
in two. Some wonderful
and strange things.

We must choose the right
projectile. Strike him
in just the right place.
Watch God, white hot,
light up the New Mexico hills.