

The University of Southern Mississippi
The Aquila Digital Community

Master's Theses

Spring 5-2016

The Scripture of Helices

Jessica M. Ramer
University of Southern Mississippi

Follow this and additional works at: https://aquila.usm.edu/masters_theses



Part of the [Literature in English, North America Commons](#), and the [Poetry Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Ramer, Jessica M., "The Scripture of Helices" (2016). *Master's Theses*. 169.
https://aquila.usm.edu/masters_theses/169

This Masters Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by The Aquila Digital Community. It has been accepted for inclusion in Master's Theses by an authorized administrator of The Aquila Digital Community. For more information, please contact Joshua.Cromwell@usm.edu.

THE SCRIPTURE OF HELICES

by

Jessica Maxine Ramer

A Thesis
Submitted to the Graduate School
and the Department of English
at The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts

Approved:

Dr. Rebecca Frank, Committee Chair
Assistant Professor, English

Dr. Angela Ball, Committee Member
Professor, English

Dr. Jameela Lares, Committee Member
Professor, English

Dr. Karen S. Coats
Dean of the Graduate School

May 2016

ABSTRACT

THE SCRIPTURE OF HELICES: POEMS

by Jessica Maxine Ramer

May 2016

This thesis comprises poems written during my two years of study for the Master of Arts Degree in English with a creative writing emphasis. The majority of the poems are written in either a received or contemporary form, although a substantial minority are written in free verse. Many of the poems deal with extreme circumstances such as combat and imprisonment. Others address family stresses due to birth, death, remarriage, and clashes of values. Some poems have a religious emphasis but others are firmly rooted in the natural world. All, however, are explorations of human nature.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my mother with gratitude for her love and support.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to extend special thanks to the members of my thesis committee, Dr. Rebecca Morgan Frank, Dr. Angela Ball, and Dr. Jameela Lares. All three have provided me with support, mentoring, and constructive criticism during these last two years. Special thanks are also due to my fellow students in the workshops for their careful reading and thoughtful comments on my poetry.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT..... ii

DEDICATION..... iii

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS iv

INTRODUCTION vii

WORKS CITED xvii

 FOR A PENTECOSTAL PREACHER'S WIFE..... 1

 MILITARY SCHOOL DOCUMENTARY 2

 THE WILD GIRL OF CHAMPAGNE..... 3

 TEENAGE APOCALYPSE..... 4

 NEW FATHERHOOD..... 5

 ON A SON DEPLOYING TO KOREA 6

 PARSIMONY OF NATURE..... 7

 THE METRONOME 8

 MASH NOTE TO DOSTOYEVSKY..... 9

 TO AN ANONYMOUS ROADWORKER BUILDING ALLIGATOR ALLEY 10

 SINNER WOMAN 11

 COLD WAR..... 12

 TO MENELAUS..... 13

 IMMORTALS BEHAVING BADLY 14

 BRIDE OF CHRIST 15

 MAXINE IN ALASKA 16

 THE SILENCE OF WOMEN..... 20

 SUGARCANE 21

ODE TO MY FLUTE	22
SECOND MARRIAGE WITH CHILDREN	23
MY MOTHER'S DAUGHTER.....	24
FAMAGUSTA	25
TOBACCO DREAMS, 1963	26
PLOWED EARTH.....	27
BARUCH'S STORY	28
MY MOTHER'S THINGS	29
ON DEPRESSION	30
BRUNO.....	31
THREE HAIKUS	32
ON THE BERLIN U-BAHN, 1985	33

INTRODUCTION

Harold Bloom, in his book *The American Religion: The Emergence of a Post Christian Nation*, wrote that “Religion is the poetry, not the opiate, of the masses” (Kindle edition location 404). Many of the poems in the collection are not about religion per se but about the human struggle with this most cathectic and yet often troubling poetry, one that stands at odds with science, the other way of understanding the world and humanity’s place in it. The title of the manuscript itself, with its juxtaposition of *scripture*, a word that almost always has religious connotations, and *helices*, a word associated with the structure of DNA and by implication to science itself, points to this theme. In fact, many poems in this collection address these questions explicitly. In the poems that don't, the theme is often implicit in the speaker's use of natural images to convey a secular *Weltanschauung*. A secondary theme of this collection is the reaction of people to extreme circumstances: chronic and severe poverty, combat, and imprisonment. In these poems, too, the search for understanding often leads back to religious questions.

Science and religion intersect in “Mash Note to Dostoyevsky,” a free verse poem that reflects nearly all the themes in this collection; in this case, the extreme condition is Dostoyevsky’s confinement in a Siberian prison, known as a *katorgi*, for political dissent. The themes of this poem—the existence of inexplicable cruelty and the sensual enjoyment of it—are drawn from “Rebellion,” a chapter in *The Brothers Karamazov*. Unlike the book, however, the poem is explicit in ascribing religious sentiment—and other aspects of human nature as well—to neurophysiology:

Critics despised your pious
submission, not knowing

fortunate men, that our prisons
are coiling gyri, the very stuff
of God: we must submit.

The link between neurophysiology and religion is made even more explicit in later lines, which attribute Dostoyevsky's religious experiences to epilepsy: "Flayed by Siberian hell and divine / epileptic ecstasy, you had no skin." Of all the poems in this thesis, this one most clearly expresses the relationship—and the tension—between science and faith.

"For a Pentecostal Preacher's Wife" is a variation on the same idea, although this poem uses mathematics—and more specifically, plane geometry—as a contrasting system of thought. This poem recounts the struggles of a woman from a fundamentalist Christian religion to find union with God through prayer, fasting, and the sacrifice of secular pleasures such as the high school prom and swimming in the ocean, something hard for Pentecostals to do because of the emphasis on modesty. At last, she gives up, tossing her prayer journal in the trash. The poem describes her failed quest for piety, saying it

Reminds you of the parallel lines deft
Rotation of the compass, slant of ruler
Created on your blue-lined graphing paper.
No matter how you drew the lines, the cleft
Between the segments stayed the same, with each
Adjacent and yet always out of reach.

While a treatise on geometry is beyond both the scope of this work and my abilities as a mathematician, there are systems of geometry in which parallel lines do meet. While

parallel lines never meet in planes, they do meet if those lines are laid out on a sphere, similar to the way in which lines of longitude on a globe, which never meet at the equator, do intersect at the poles. The existence of different and yet internally consistent modes of thinking suggest that contradictions in one logical system may not be contradictions in another—an insight that may be useful in understanding the seemingly contradictory ideas of this work.

While many poems in this collection juxtapose faith and reason as represented by either science or mathematics, others are expressions of deep faith. In “On a Son Deploying to Korea,” a father, grief-stricken over the severe wounding of his son in combat and the upcoming deployment of another son, born later in his life and with whom he had a troubled relationship, laments, “Daniel, my son, my son, / God knew what he was doing / when he gave children to the young.” These words echo David’s lament over Absalom. In “Plowed Earth,” a young woman whose mother is dying prematurely of cancer recalls

. . . church pews filled by men with the desire
For a good crop to stave off foreclosure and women stirring
Silently to soothe their fretful infants to sleep, eyes dull,
Nails broken by washboards and grubbing burdock roots. . . .

In both of these poems, religion offers solace to people facing the almost unendurable hardships of gravely wounded children and severe, chronic poverty that threatens to strip them of the little they have.

This collection also contains several poems in which religious questions arise in response to combat and imprisonment. In “The Metronome,” a Haitian immigrant leaves

the seminary—and his dream of being a priest—to support his younger, orphaned sister. He joins the army and serves in Iraq, an experience that undermines his earlier beliefs: “His rifle greased, / He radioed reports in monotones, / And doubted that he’d ever be a priest.” In “On the Berlin U-Bahn, 1985,” a young woman sees a man with “prison in his eyes.” The location and date of the poem strongly imply that the man is a Holocaust survivor. He sits on the subway clutching his dog, an act that indicates he has turned to nature for comfort. The woman, on the other hand, walks through the Breitscheid Platz with its church severely damaged in an Allied bombing and left unrepaired as a monument to the horrors of war:

Outside its bombed out church where scaffolds rise
Like bars, the Savior’s visage in its hold,
I saw a man with prison in his eyes.

Inside the church, a crack-laced Jesus, wise
But distant, called his lambs into their fold,
When I returned to say my last goodbyes
And saw a man with prison in his eyes.

The ending is an ambiguous one, in which readers may decide for themselves whether the founder of Christianity is a hollow myth or the Redeemer who suffers along with us even if he is powerless to prevent injustice.

The theme of powerless recurs in poems on ordinary difficulties such as family instability. “Military School Documentary” and “Teenage Apocalypse,” poems about children in reconfigured families, fit neatly into the same scientific view of the world

expressed in “Mash Note to Dostoyevsky.” In this case, though, the dominant paradigm is not neurophysiology but parental investment theory, an offshoot of evolutionary theory that predicts minimal parental investment in genetically unrelated children or unattractive biological children who are unlikely to reproduce and hence continue the parents’ genes into future generations. In the first poem, a near-sighted, overweight boy is sent to a military boarding school by his newly remarried mother, an act that subjects him to an environment for which he is particularly ill-suited. In the second poem, an irritable teenage girl resists attempts to force her into serving as a duty date for a step-relation she finds physically repulsive by claiming to be in love with him, a possibility that shocks her mother: “How can you be so selfish?” Mom yells as she whips / her head around. “That could wreck my marriage. My home.” While not explicitly stated in the poem, the implication is that the mother fears the possibility of a sexual relationship between them, a situation that she would regard as incest.

Other poems in this collection explore the general theme of the powerlessness experienced by farmers and manual laborers. “Plowed Earth” and “To an Anonymous Road Worker Building Alligator Alley” depict people whose “workplace” is found in nature. These poems, though, present a rather unsentimental view of nature as a cruel force threatening to overpower those who are too close to it. Much of “Plowed Earth” depicts the owners of small farms as people who are driven to exhaustion and physical brokenness by unrelenting toil but are unable to rise above poverty. The poem on the road worker describes the man yearning to flee that “freedom of space,” an indirect comment on Viktor Frankl’s loose paraphrase of Psalm 118: 5 in his book *Man’s Search for Meaning*: “I called to the Lord from my narrow prison and he answered me in the

freedom of space” (89). This poem takes the position that space can be a prison, too, especially at that time in the Everglades where distances were large and transportation was limited. This poem is a villanelle, a form whose repetition strengthens the theme of the monotony, both of the work itself and the setting, with its endless miles of nothing but sawgrass.

“To an Anonymous Road Worker Building Alligator Alley” is one of five poems in the collection that are either villanelles, broken villanelles, or villanelle-ghazal hybrids. This particular form, with its demands for rhyme and repetition, illustrates the challenges of working in any form. One of those challenges is finding the proper match between that form and a poem’s content. I became acutely aware of this problem when examining the poems using the villanelle structure. One of them, “Sugarcane” would have been a better poem if it had been written in a different form. The story of two adolescents exploring the yard of an abandoned house did not provide enough material of interest to justify repeating entire lines. On the other hand, I find that themes that are repetitive by nature work well with the villanelle. Trauma is often recalled endlessly and thus is suited to the villanelle. For that reason, “On the Berlin U-Bahn, 1985” works reasonably well. The poem about repetitive manual labor, “To an Anonymous Road Worker Building Alligator Alley,” while not as strong as the other villanelles, shows a good match between form and content. “Teenage Apocalypse,” whose speaker is an irritable teenage girl given to repetitive complaints, is well-served by the broken villanelle-ghazal hybrid, whose double layer of rhyme contributes to the comedy of the poem.

In working with rhyme, I have come to appreciate the truth of A.E. Stallings’s statement that “rhyme frees a poet from what he wants to say.” I have found that the

demands of working in a strict form have nudged me out of my habitual and often clichéd ways of thinking and helped me find a more original image. For example, I doubt that when writing “On a Pentecostal Preacher’s Wife,” that I would have compared a failed religious quest to the impossibility of forcing parallel lines in a plane to meet without being forced to find rhyming words that led me to that image. Similarly, in “Tobacco Dreams, 1963,” I almost certainly would never have found the image of a man pawing through a child’s clothing to find his beloved’s underwear—an image that suggests both his frustrated sexuality and the feeling that this child is an impediment to his relationship with the mother.

Several of the poems are written as Sapphic stanzas. Composed of three 11-syllable lines and a five-syllable line called an adonic, the form uses trochaic and dactylic feet rather than iambs. The form also allows occasional spondaic substitutions. The meter was originally quantitative rather than accentual, but the accent-based nature of English has led poets working in this language to write Sapphic stanzas with stressed and unstressed syllables rather than long and short ones. The combination of dactyls and trochees gives hendecasyllabic lines the feel “not so much of falling as of stumbling and righting oneself” (Hadas 81). In “Writing in the Manner of Sappho,” the Australian poet, John Tranter wrote a Sapphic stanza about writing Sapphic stanzas, comparing the form to a drunk:

Lines begin and end with a pair of trochees;
in between them dozes a dactyl, rhythm
rising and falling,

like a drunk asleep at a party. Ancient
Greek — the language seemed to be made for Sapphics,
not a worry; anyone used to English
finds it a bastard.

In spite of the difficulties of writing in a meter not obviously suited to the English language, I do find that it is useful for subjects in which something is slightly abnormal. For example, “Tobacco Dreams, 1963” is written in Sapphic sonnets but with a Petrarchan rhyme scheme. The vague awkwardness of the meter complements the subject matter: a sexually rebuffed older man who is desperately in love with a much younger and very beautiful woman:

Staring at her picture, he clicks his lighter,
Hears her daughter quietly breathing. While
Smoke ascends, he struggles to reconcile
Love with no lover.

The departure from an iambic meter, even a loose one, is a cue that something else is off-kilter, too.

The character in this poem appears in another poem, “Bruno” about a young man who beats another driver after a car crash. In this poem, though, I used an Anglo-Saxon meter with four stresses per line and alliterations on either side of a medial caesura to tie the lines together. Since this form counts stresses rather than syllables, the intensity of the poem can be varied by the number of unstressed syllables added to each line. In this way, the tone of the poem can shift from the violent, in which very few extra syllables are added, to the merely sad, when more extra syllables appear in each line.

While form contributes to the meaning of many poems in this collection, I have also found that some poems are best written in free verse, perhaps because there is no form—at least not one that I know and am proficient in—for expressing the ideas of that poem. Of the free verse poems, the one I believe is best served by the decision to eschew form is “Mash Note to Dostoyevsky.” Free verse allowed me the freedom to juxtapose opposite ideas like religion and neuroscience, experiment with using Russian words like *katorgi* and move back and forth between settings like Siberian prisons, with their gratuitous cruelty, and the inner life of a 21st century American woman. “Baruch’s Story” is another such poem. Based on the life of Baruch Kimmerling, an Israeli sociologist, it tells the story of a Jewish child and his parents who hide in the Carpathian Mountains during World War II. The poem is based both on his book, *Marginal and the Center: The Life Story of a Public Sociologist* (17 – 22) and his personal discussions with me. While I might have been able to write poems about Dostoyevsky and Kimmerling in a received form, I would not have written these particular poems if I had been constrained by form.

Ultimately, my experimentation with form is a continuation of what I am trying to do as a poet: I have tried to address the important questions of humanity’s struggle to find its place in the world and to make sense of it without offering a specific theodicy. Most of all, I have tried to find the kind of poetic music that would accentuate the themes without overwhelming them.

For myself, I have only the most tentative and no doubt transitory answers to the questions raised in these poems. I believe that science is factually true but that religion is true to human nature in a way that science is not. Perhaps the image of the helix is germane to this question: religion, with its often exquisitely beautiful poetry and its

ability to comfort, and science, with its ability to inspire wonder, feed, and heal, are the two forces that unite man with the larger world and lessen its harshness. These two strands are woven together to form the intricate being that is man. From this perspective, the loss of either strand would impoverish humanity. These poems, ultimately, are a struggle to find a perspective that embraces both with no loss of what is essential to either.

WORKS CITED

- Bloom, Harold. *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992. Kindle file.
- Dostoyevsky, Fyodor, and Constance Garnett. *The Brothers Karamazov*. New York: Barnes & Noble, 1995. Print.
- Frankl, Viktor E. *Man's Search for Meaning*. Boston: Beacon, 2006. Kindle file.
- Haddas, Rachel. "All Composed in a Meter of Catullus Hendecasyllabics." *An Exaltation of Forms*. Ed. Annie Finch and Katherine Varnes. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan, 2002. 81-85. Print.
- Kimmerling, Baruch. *Marginal at the Center: The Life Story of a Public Sociologist*. New York: Berghahn, 2012. Print.
- McIver, Stuart B. *Dreamers, Schemers, and Scalawags*. Sarasota, FL: Pineapple, 1994. Print.
- Shulman, Grace. "Sapphics." *An Exaltation of Forms*. Ed. Annie Finch and Katherine Varnes. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan, 2002. 132-40. Print.
- Stallings, A.E. "Rhyme Driven." *Harriet: A Poetry Blog*. Poetry Foundation, 13 Jan. 2008. Web. 14 Feb. 2016.
- Tranter, John. "Writing in the Manner of Sappho." *Metre Spring* (1997): 6. Web. 14 Feb. 2016. <<http://metre.ff.cuni.cz/articles/>>.

FOR A PENTECOSTAL PREACHER'S WIFE

You tossed your journal in the trash, debris
Of decades parsing sacred algebra
With prayer and weekly fasts; the first, abscissa,
The second, ordinate, of ecstasy
You never found. Your quest for piety—
The books unread, no beach with the aroma
Of sizzling meat or dances with gardenia
Corsages, Friday nights at Bible study—
Reminds you of the parallel lines deft
Rotation of the compass, slant of ruler
Created on your blue-lined graphing paper.
No matter how you drew the lines, the cleft
Between the segments stayed the same, with each
Adjacent and yet always out of reach.

MILITARY SCHOOL DOCUMENTARY

During the shoot, he clenches his jaws to damp tears,
although the camera shows a few gathering above
his lower lids. A ten-year-old "Piggy," he is marooned,
this time, in a military boarding school
for surplus stepsons run by troop-to-teacher
marines. "My parents sent me here and I'm trying to do
my best." He tucks in his shirt so he won't accrue
more demerits, keeps his eyes lowered to escape ridicule
for failing the obstacle course again, and knows a mother's love
for a fat boy ends when a new husband appears.

THE WILD GIRL OF CHAMPAGNE

Her leather pouch held a knife,
its handle inscribed
with unknown characters.
She had thumbs like trowels
for digging roots and fingers
spread like a seine for catching
frogs and fish in the shallow
creeks around Champagne.
She learned to speak,
told the nuns slavers had painted
her black and sold her—
an easier memory than being lost
in woods outside a peasant village,
her stepmother returning home after
an indifferent search and sitting down
to a quieter, and larger, supper.

TEENAGE APOCALYPSE

The four horsemen of the bitchy apocalypse—
Mom and I have our periods at the same time—
usher in an ersatz family apocalypse.

The doorbell rings. "Nanny's" gray hair and wide hips
loom. "Why do I have to call a stranger that name?"
Mom's four horsemen of the cranky apocalypse

glare at me during dinner while pursing their lips.
"Nanny" snores on the couch all night outside my room
in a sleepless ersatz-granny apocalypse.

The next day, an unknown boy whose head's an ellipse
with acne—her grandson—takes me to his prom.
O four horsemen of the cootie apocalypse,

deliver me from duty-date relationships.
The next day, I lie, say I'm in love with him
and usher in a brimstone-y apocalypse.

"How can you be so selfish?" Mom yells as she whips
her head around. "That could wreck my marriage. My home."
The four horsemen of the bitchy apocalypse
usher in an ersatz family apocalypse.

NEW FATHERHOOD

When he was born, you drank the heady brew
Of parenthood— delight enough to buoy
A man exhausted by the screaming viceroy
Who kicked your once well-ordered world askew.
This interloper launched a palace coup,
Demoted you to household laundry boy
Who washes baby-soiled corduroy,
And storms your meager sleep to summon you.
Before his mother nurses the usurper,
She turns away, undoes her blouse. Your lips
In tight-set lines betray a father's bitter
Awareness of precipitous eclipse—
How little light escapes the darkness spun
By him, your cherished and resented son.

ON A SON DEPLOYING TO KOREA

Daniel, my son, my son,
God knew what he was doing
when he gave children to the young.
Not quite old when you were born,
I was a fat, graying father
mired in memories of the Marne,

hiding behind my closed study door
to escape the sight of you,
all eyes behind thick glasses,
engrossed by ants and termites
because you couldn't find your way
with others—even your father.

You tried. I know. I winced
whenever I looked out the window
to see you strike out yet again,
every limb limp, like a hanged man
dangling from the gallows
as other kids yelled at you.

Grief flogged me into old age,
when Emmett returned from Anzio,
leg, eye, and several fingers gone.
I spewed an aged man's bitterness,
wished it had been you instead.
Daniel, my son, my son,
forgive an old man his folly.

PARSIMONY OF NATURE

Delta of Venus, whose heroine painted
her vulva red with lipstick as men's breath quickened,
has been placed on the closet shelf holding
other books that will never be read again,
along with postcards from the Lothario I mistook for a lover.
One mailed from the Mediterranean
reads, "Next October, we will be here together."

I was merely a stop on his flight
from the aging wife he denied having,
two bookies dunning him for money he owed.
I saw this only after a hormonal bender
subsided into an aching middle-aged hangover,
and the sensuality I tried to conceal but couldn't quite
manage to do, he said, faded like ink on an old love letter.

THE METRONOME

My student Toussaint's face was never creased
When doing math; a kid who grasped unknowns,
He told me once he hoped to be a priest.

Two years before he'd consecrate the feast
Above an altar holding sacred bones,
His mother died. He packed away his creased

Black pants and joined the army, which at least
Would feed his sister and pay off his loans.
He'd planned to serve four years and then be a priest.

His service photo shows him green and fleeced
Of hair. This man who'd see two combat zones
Exchanged a deacon's collar, white and creased,

For camo in Tikrit. His rifle greased,
He radioed reports in monotones,
And doubted that he'd ever be a priest.

I saw him after he had been released.
"Are you okay?"
A metronome would have clicked off four slow beats.
"Yes, miss," he said in Creole-seasoned tones,
A produce manager, his face now creased,
My student who had yearned to be a priest.

MASH NOTE TO DOSTOYEVSKY

Turgenev called you the nastiest
Christian he had ever met.
Critics despised your pious
submission, not knowing,
fortunate men, that our prisons
are coiling gyri, the very stuff
of God: we must submit.
At the Siberian *katorgi*,
floggers plied their trade,
spoke of their calling
with the same choking tone
other men use when talking about
cunt as they swallowed saliva,
showing the inside of their tobacco-
stained lower lip stretched into smirks.
Flayed by Siberian hell and divine
epileptic ecstasy, you had no skin,
were a five-foot abscess
of interictal irritability.
Yet, I loved you after your first
twelve sentences, longed to roll
your Russian words over my tongue,
created dialogues for us
because you knew. You knew.

TO AN ANONYMOUS ROADWORKER BUILDING ALLIGATOR ALLEY

"Please Lord, I've been a good man. So if I get cotton-mouth bit, or attacked by some of Oscar the Alligator's brothers, and if I get to that Big Job in the Sky, oh, please, Lord, let it be on dry land. Amen!"

Graffiti on an Outhouse for the Alligator Alley Road Crew (McIver 214)

You stood in swamp water up to the knee,
muscles moving to the rhythm of space,
toiling to build Alligator Alley.

Within that sawgrass curtain where wary
denizens guarded their kingdom of space,
you stood in swamp water up to the knee.

Stripping off muck as your walkie-talkie
chattered, you slogged through this bedlam of space,
toiling to build Alligator Alley.

Imprisoned by miles of sawgrass sea,
and yearning to flee this "freedom of space,"
you stood in swamp water up to the knee.

Far from home, you prayed, "Let my next job be
on dry land, not some two-bit thumb of space,
toiling to build Alligator Alley."

Nameless man, known only by the scrawled plea
in an outhouse squeezed on some crumb of space,
you stood in swamp water up to the knee
toiling to build Alligator Alley

SINNER WOMAN

If I were a Holiness woman, my face would glow
With the peace of Christ as I clutched the belief
My daughter was in His arms after her brief
Months with me, knowing I would follow
Her as my old Sunday school fresco
Promised. Its pastel lamb motif
Mocks photos bound in a ribbon-tied sheaf
Taken months—and a whole lifetime—ago.

But I am a sinner woman mourning
A bastard child, her father unknown
Even to me, who watched the ocean stir
As the weighted casket sank, swallowing
An infant in an oyster-grey dress sewn
With faux pearls. I wear pearls at Easter for her.

COLD WAR

In a room smelling like diaper rash cream,
a woman lies in bed as the husky stands guard
over her infant son. Gravel crunches on the road
below her window. A car engine shudders and stops.
The dog looks at his mistress and sotto voce woofs.
Hearing no footsteps on the stairs,
she slips into bedroom shoes. They tap softly on the carpet
as she walks to the window. Kneeling to peer
through the crack between curtain
and sill, she sees her husband
hunched over the steering wheel,
aurorae dancing over his fur-lined parka hood.
She rises, checks on the baby, returns to bed.

TO MENELAUS

You saw the marble whiteness
of her skin, the nose not a micrometer
less than perfect. You did not see
her ease in slipping off
her mantle, the near flush
that spread across her cheeks
while she ate, eyes raised
as if she were seeing the flavors
of barley bread dipped in wine,
her almost imperceptible way
of breathing in time to the lyre
your slave played in the banquet hall.
Your own daughter of Zeus,
won from her stepfather,
entered the bridal chamber mute.
What should a work of art say?

IMMORTALS BEHAVING BADLY

Nights at Mount Olympus where banquet tables
groaned with sushi boats and carafes of sake,
karaoke singers amused the gods by
mimicking mortals.

When tempura ice cream was served, Apollo
taught us scatological German phrases.
Ashen-faced Athena complained no goddess
uses such language.

Zeus guffawed as Ares and Hermes spat out
Fick und *Scheiße*, spilled their Hokkaido-vinted
ume wine and brandished their chopsticks, vexing
humorless Hera.

Dionysus strutted in baggy trousers.
"Pull your pants up," Artemis ordered. "Gods look
über stupid showing their underwear, you
hybrid immortal."

"Bite me, Virgin Mistress of plagues and hunters.
I don't care what celibate prudes who earn their
goddess stripes defending uncultured Spartans
think of my boxers."

BRIDE OF CHRIST

For Karen Armstrong

How happily I threw away my old clothes for the habit,
peeled off the old life of chaperoned dances
with partners who stepped on pink satin shoes,
and late-night gropes in parked cars by sweaty-palmed boys
reeking of testosterone and aftershave.

Every dish washed, each obedient submission
to wimpled women in musty robes
prepared a place for You.

Pared and cored, I awaited
Your coming, kneeling seven times daily
in the chapel until I submitted to absence:
you would not come, not ever, not to me.
And I collapsed on myself like a fallen soufflé.

MAXINE IN ALASKA

Your First Cruise

Air force families board a ship, sail from Seattle
to Anchorage. Everyone has a job. You stand on deck
for four hours every evening
keeping watch for enemy submarines.

Anchorage

False-fronted bars like movie-set saloons
line Anchorage streets, their peeling paint
matching the snow and mud mixed by tires.
Just shy of twenty, you sit in the backseat and cry.

Sliding Away

Even with snow chains, the roads are slick.
You drive to work every morning in the dark
gripping the steering wheel and biting your lip
as the car slides on the ice.

The Bird Colonel's Office

Sweet potato plants festoon the bird colonel's office,
foliage draping down over hanging pots.
You tend the only green you see for six months
with a brass watering can kept under the desk.

Fall

Resting on cement blocks, the clapboard house
with peeling gray paint provides a den for the hibernating
bear, which stirs when the children make noise.
"Shhh. You'll wake the bear," the family whispers.

Spring

A bear walks downtown to the movie theater,
pacing up and down the line of people waiting
to see a film. "Bear Goes to the Movies,"
the headline says. Which movie, it doesn't say.

A Rumor of War

Khrushchev bangs his shoe on the table.
 If nuclear war breaks out, Alaska will be the first hit.
 That night, you draw the shades. The next morning,
 you open them and look outside. There is still an outside.

Heat Wave

In the evening, the sun lingers just above
 the horizon before traversing the sky again.
 You stand outside in your red swimsuit,
 your iron plugged into the porch light socket.

Twenty-one, Trapped, and Pregnant

The second week of March, a snow storm
 blocks your door. You fear being trapped
 in the house during labor. Your neighbor tells you,
 "Don't worry. If I can load bombs, I can catch a baby."

Evaporated Milk

You stacked your kitchen shelves with blue and red cans
 of condensed milk: cows went dry in the cold darkness
 and milk was shipped from Seattle. People like what they can get:
 You still insist that condensed milk is good.

Alaskan King Crab

The odor of boiling shellfish permeates
 your kitchen. It is the cheapest meat,
 one that stretches out the oatmeal,
 canned spinach, and white-flour biscuits.

Winter

Housewives tug on their parkas and galoshes
 and trudge across the quadrangle
 to Mary's house for their morning beer.
 The dark makes you drink, they all say.

Radar Operators

Men from the archipelago of radar stations
 facing Siberia descend on the town. When
 the weekend is over, broken necks

of whiskey bottles litter the street at sunrise.

Feral Dogs

Air Force families shipping out
to the lower 48 can't take their dogs.
Turned loose, they form packs.
Non-commissioned officers shoot them with rifles.

Evacuation Drill

Military wives and children ride in trucks down
gravel roads, where the Air Force sets up a camp.
You use the outhouse covered in canvas like a teepee,
look up through the open roof and see a helicopter hovering.

Power Failure

The power goes out—along with the electric heat.
You bundle your children in snow suits
and take them into bed—along with the dog,
who lies under the covers and brings the gift of body heat.

Maternity Clothes

“Dan, hold the baby,” you hiss at your husband,
who stares, unhearing, into the distance.
Your homemade maternity skirt
falls off. In church. On Easter Sunday.

Search and Rescue

Climbers disappear in the mountains just west
of Anchorage. A search and rescue crew
looking for the adventurers crashes
into the foggy mountain side. All aboard are killed.

Security Breach

Two islands, one Russian, the other American,
lie in the Bering Strait. Eskimos
kayak back and forth, trading. Khrushchev
and Eisenhower ignore this security threat.

The Alcan Highway

The camper smells like propane and dirty diapers
as you bump down the gravel road toward Florida,
with its fresh milk and cockroaches as big as butterflies.
You arrive just in time for the Cuban Missile Crisis.

THE SILENCE OF WOMEN

Two dozen women sit on wooden benches
 As men, their men, are seated in the dock.
 The judge arrives. The women gauge their chances
 By sizing up the slit-like eyes, the walk.
 A name is called. A Haitian woman blanches
 Until her skin looks like the yellow chalk
 She'd used to draw her hopscotch courts, then hair
 And jacket bouncing, leap from square to square.

A twenty-five-year term. She visits him
 Each week—when he's not on the box. His trousers
 He says, slip down when he is in the gym,
 A fact reported by two strong-arm robbers.
 Rewarded with a mailroom job, they'll skim
 The stamps that family members send in letters,
 Then sell the purloined flags and presidents
 At discounts, both for profit and defiance.

She texts me news—an overturned conviction.
 He pleads and is released to house arrest.
 Her gifts are fragrant bowls of *riz djon djon*,
 Some closet space, and two drawers in her chest
 To mark the end of his incarceration
 And start of a new life, one not obsessed
 By uniforms and guards and iron bars.
 That night, he parts the curtains, sees the stars.

He struggles to remain invisible,
 Commutes to work while flinching at each siren,
 Obeys speed limits, tries to use his signal
 At every turn. On leaving this new prison,
 They cut the monitor off his left ankle.
 In jail since nineteen, he wants other women
 And leaves. Her Facebook page implies his absence—
 His pixel-words have vanished into silence.

SUGARCANE

He took his knife and pared the stalk away,
Revealing fibrous sweetness at the core
With hurried strokes because we could not stay.

Behind a house beginning to decay,
With buckled roof and sagging wooden floor,
He took his knife and pared the stalk away.

Beneath the gumbo limbo tree the day
Before school started, we mined sweetened ore
With hurried strokes because we could not stay.

As we watched birds in V-formation splay
Their wings while traveling toward some farther shore,
He took his knife and pared the stalk away.

Before we left our adolescent play
For homes where no one met us at the door,
He took his knife and pared the stalk away.

The Florida sunset mingling red and grey
Grew darker but because we wanted more,
He took his knife and pared the stalk away
With hurried strokes because we could not stay.

ODE TO MY FLUTE

My brother blows through soda bottles better—
You hear the notes—than I can play the flute.
I get the whoosh of air through a pea shooter.

But after YouTube videos and brute
Attempts to force the hole and lower lip
Together the right way—a tinny toot—

The kind that makes a concert flautist yip
In pain at music worse than screeching grackles.
I listen to beginner pieces slip

Off key, each piercing shriek much like the scribbles
I call my poetry, their lines unfed
By melody, just desperate, plaintive warbles.

I ache, while joining body to the head
And foot joints, for a rush of notes to prime
A flight of song, bore through the door a hundred

Unuttered words have jammed, for tones to mime
The words I seek but almost never find
And lend enchantment to each graceless rhyme.

SECOND MARRIAGE WITH CHILDREN

No longer the solitary star
about which my children trace
their claustrophobic rings,
I spin closer
to our common center.
Here, I will nudge
these half-formed
planets away from me
and teach them to race
a longer path about us
as we orbit each other.

MY MOTHER'S DAUGHTER

Propelled along
my major axis
by your thrust,
one that cleared
the way for your
newer star,
I left my elliptical path
for a more eccentric orbit.

Now you want me to betray
the freedom you flung
me into, obediently race
a narrower path
around a foreign sun.
It is a cold light
you ask me to face.

FAMAGUSTA

"During Ramadan, we will roam
Hills with walled cities built
In stones the color of desert sand.
In this, our temporary home,
I will get your tongue to bend
around the Turkish dotted u's.
üzüm, ünlü, ümit.

“At dusk, we’ll stand at the quay,
Watch fishing boats weave in the sea;
When we’ve gambled away our share
At the Kaya Artemis—I’ll teach you
How to play blackjack and shoot craps—
We’ll head upstairs and roll into sleep.”

TOBACCO DREAMS, 1963

Staring at her picture, he clicks his lighter,
Hears her daughter quietly breathing. While
Smoke ascends, he struggles to reconcile
Love with no lover.

He returns her gaze from the portrait. In her
Wedding gown, one cut in the modest style
Common then, she stares with a distant smile.
She's for another.

Rooting in the hamper, he finds her panties
Buried under layers of children's Hello-
Kitty clothes, caresses the blue and yellow
Flowers and knows he's

No romantic hero; an aging Don Juan,
He's the babysitter, a man to lean on.

PLOWED EARTH

“April is the cruellest month, breeding

Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing

Memory and desire, stirring

Dull roots with spring rain.” T.S. Eliot

You wear a strapless red formal to the prom that April, early enough for photos in the yearbook. That dance is your last date before you meet the man who would be "the one," your escape from a fanatical father and the cruelest part of your mother's illness. If she had gone the month she found the lump to a real doctor, not the quack breeding botched diagnoses, she would still smell like lilacs and lavender sachet, not like the illness oozing out from her pores, one that even the strongest soap, vials of White Shoulders can't cover. When your husband is posted to the dreariest Air Force base—the one in Anchorage, graveyard of dead careers—you visit your mother one last time, drive through farmland on Sunday afternoon, watching the melted snow mixing freshly plowed dirt into mud. The smell beckons the memory of those years of Sunday drives with the hours and hours spent in country churches filled by men with the desire for a good crop to stave off foreclosure and women stirring silently to soothe their fretful infants to sleep, eyes dull, nails broken by washboards and grubbing burdock roots from their gardens, bodies flabby, faces taut with the tension of wondering, each year for decades, if that spring will bring enough to hang on for another year, warmth and rain.

BARUCH'S STORY

In Memory of Baruch Kimmerling, 1939 – 2007

It was over. The war you spent in a Gypsy wagon
wandering through the Carpathian Mountains,
just ahead of the Nazis, your mother paying villagers
to hide them, using the muslin bag of coins and jewels
she had secreted in the blanket you called
a *tokorbe*, garbled Hungarian for "May I cover you?"

The war in which you trudged with
a column of refugees as Stukas strafed you.
Uncle Berko pushed you into a ditch as a bullet
pierced the skull of the Romanian soldier next to you.
Parts of his brain splashed on your hand.
The world tilted on its axis.

The war in which you watched the oil fields of Ploesti
blaze as you peered out the window of an abandoned
peasant hovel, listening with your parents
as Katyusas advanced in the East while FlaKs retreated
in the west. You listened and waited. And waited.

The war in which Yiddish-speaking soldiers, louse-ridden
and reeking, knocked on the door and asked for shelter.
As they slept, Kalashnikovs against the wall,
their terrible stench kept you from sleeping
but it was, you thought, the smell of freedom.

It was over, the war. You returned to Turda.
Your home and the apple tree survived.
After breakfast, you climbed it, clutching your blanket,
a pretend artillery officer gunning down Stukas
until dinnertime. As you lay in bed, wrapped in your *tokorbe*,
A plane flew overhead—one of yours—and you trembled.

MY MOTHER'S THINGS

In the photograph,
She is eighteen, swathed in lace,
Clutching red roses.
Her marriage exploded but
The picture hangs in the hall.

Twenty dollars stashed
In a tampon box: hidden
Place for secret things.
She sleeps with it in her pants
Now that she is seventy.

Serving knife handles
Carved from walrus ivory
Look like polar bears
Stretched out on arctic ice floes.
They rest in Florida now.

A black, leather-bound
King James Bible records
Births, marriages, deaths.
Tracts tucked inside claim the pope
Is the whore of Babylon.

Two China figures—
Bought before her father heard
The call and forbid
Dancing—stand in her beech hutch,
Hands joined, waiting for music.

A wood and brass trunk,
Holds a crocheted tablecloth:
Heirlooms handed down
Through generations until
Threads break, wood decays, lines die.

ON DEPRESSION

After I had shivered and wept in Hades,
Choking down libations so vile none but
Pluto, Lord of Death, could esteem them honors,
Hermes snatched me

Back to Mount Olympus and banquet tables
Heaped with lamb. Elysian fires warmed me
As Apollo plucked an enchanted harp, his
Notes like nectar.

Fragile comfort, feasting with gods and drinking
When the scarlet seeds in my belly send down
Stubborn rootlets ferrying me back over
Bitter waters.

BRUNO

After the crash, the crumpled metal,
he ran to the car, amnestic with rage,
pulled the driver out, pounded his head
on the icy pavement. Papa took care

of the bills, the cops—and the girl in Colby.
Decades later, he left the aging
woman he married for his Madonna-gentle
secretary, a twenty-something

carbon copy of Jackie Kennedy.
When she dropped him, he drove behind
her as she left work, the acrid stench
of unwashed crotch filling his car.

.

THREE HAIKUS

In Anchorage snow
before the false-front saloon,
bottlenecks glitter.

Emerging leaves weave
A shawl for shuckling branches:
Crape Myrtles at prayer.

Dolphins leap in wake.
To the east, crocodiles
Sleep beneath mangroves

ON THE BERLIN U-BAHN, 1985

When I returned to say my last goodbyes,
My body swaying as the U-Bahn rolled,
I saw a man with prison in his eyes.

He held his dog as if to exorcise
Some haunting sorrow festering unconsolated
When I returned to say my last goodbyes.

The train pulled in. I left in chilled surprise,
But as the station's escalator scrolled,
I saw a man with prison in his eyes.

I strolled the Breitscheid Platz where Turkish pies
And t-shirts stamped "I heart Berlin" are sold
When I returned to say my last goodbyes.

Outside its bombed-out church where scaffolds rise
Like bars, the Savior's visage in their hold,
I saw a man with prison in his eyes.

Inside the church, a crack-laced Jesus, wise
But distant, called his lambs into their fold,
When I returned to say my last goodbyes
And saw a man with prison in his eyes.