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The University of Southern Mississippi

PETTICOAT GOVERNMENT: POEMS AND ESSAYS

by

Tiffany Ann Noonan

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

May 2009

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The University of Southern Mississippi

PETTICOAT GOVERNMENT: POEMS AND ESSAYS

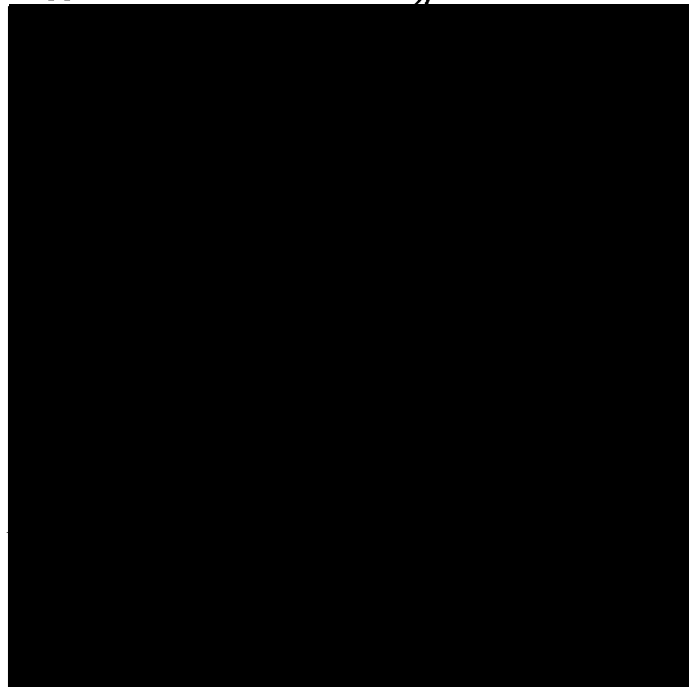
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ABSTRACT

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by Tiffany Ann Noonan

May 2009

Petticoat Government is a collection of poems and essays that draw upon the varied lexicons of science, mythology, sports, literature, travel, art, fashion, and popular culture in an attempt to understand what delimitates womanhood. Using a mix of traditional and contemporary forms, these texts seek to complicate the myriad—and often conflicting—models of femaleness and the female body.

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This collection would not exist without the University of Southern Mississippi's English Department and Center for Writers. I cannot imagine a better community of writers, scholars, and friends. It would be impossible to name everyone who has had an impact on me and the works in this collection, but certain individuals deserve mention for going above and beyond the call of duty: Fred Clarke, Eric Flynt, Scott Fynboe, Keith Harms, Rhonda Lott, Allison Riddles, Jordan Sanderson, Beth Slaby, Erin Elizabeth Smith, Lindsay Walker, John Wang, Lynn Watson, Jennifer Westfield, Gary Wilkens, and William Wright.

Special acknowledgment to the editors of the following publications, in which some of the works collected in *Petticoat Government* first appeared (occasionally in early versions): *88: A Journal of Contemporary American Poetry*: "Dorothy Hamill Interviews Herself"; *Phoebe*: "anatomy"; *WOMB*: "Advent: Transform Time of the Little Girl," "Aggressive Pesto Warfare," "Observing the Professional Visitor," "Portrait of the Artist as Order *Cetacea*," "Women's Rugby, Law 22: Maul"; *Word For/Word*: "Multiple Choice," "Predictable Contemplations of the Body as Planet as Body," "Sundog / Zodiac of a Fingernail." Drafts of the texts within this collection have also appeared—both

publicly and privately—on my blogs *water veiled* (<http://lyria.livjournal.com/>) and *[wi•ki•tha•ra]* (<http://wikithara.blogspot.com/>).

Finally, thanks to Eric Tribunella, whose discussion of Victorian boyhood and *Tom Brown's School Days* inspired the title; to Jaime Malanowski for his insightful look into the publishing world; to the amazing women of the Pussipo Collective; and to both Danielle Sypher-Haley and Rie Fortenberry, the true “masters” of English.

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PREFACE

When I began composing the works that would eventually become *Petticoat Government*, I strove to grow beyond the work of my first collection, *The Bone Folders*. As a result, *Petticoat Government* embodies a changed attitude toward form and content, language and the body. It draws upon the varied lexicons of science, mythology, sports, literature, travel, art, fashion, and popular culture in an attempt to understand what delimitates womanhood. It includes poems written in traditional and experimental forms, as well as essays that speak to personal struggles with self-representation. The text embraces difficult structures and ideas. In this sense, everything in *Petticoat Government* is new and different.

Still, *Petticoat Government* hinges on early explorations that engaged in the types of poetic inquiry that characterize my current work. My preoccupations, what drives me to think and write, have not changed. My desire to investigate the self, to find a(ny) vocabulary capable of self-representation, persists. I continue to work within, and occasionally subvert, prescribed forms and genres. In this sense, nothing in *Petticoat Government* is new or different.

Perhaps it would be more accurate to characterize the relationship between my past work and *Petticoat Government* as a thought experiment. Like Schrödinger's Cat, the past is dead, and the past is alive. We cannot deny the possibility of either state nor confirm the impossibility of both. Or perhaps, as has been noted by quantum physicists, there are not simply two conditions but *many* hinging on an infinite number of variables, equations, iterations. Compare this with Elizabeth Bishop's answers to the "questions

raised” by poetic composition: “It all depends . . . and the range of possibilities is, one trusts, infinite. After all, the poet’s concern is not consistency” (607).

The first poem from *Petticoat Government* that was consciously written separate from and independent of *The Bone Folders* began with a challenge by my colleagues.

“You should write a poem about ice skating,” one said.

“Yeah, it should be about either Brian Boitano or Dorothy Hamill,” said another.

“And it should be in the second person.”

“And you can’t use any prepositions.”

“You have to include a Zamboni.”

“And mention smoking.”

I did not think that it was possible to write a poem with such restricted form, content, and subject matter. But that week, I wrote a group of second-person koans about Dorothy Hamill and ice skating without a single preposition. The writing process was a revelation. Certainly I was no stranger to traditional and contemporary poetic forms, but I had never seen restriction so profoundly dictate the outcome. The limited, second-person voice lent itself to internal monologue; there could be no dialogue, no “I” to an external “you.” The lack of prepositions forced me to demonstrate relationship without direct linguistic connection. Because koans are intuitive, not logical, I was able to make the images—provided largely by the restrictions themselves—resonate with each other.

What emerged was the first draft of “Dorothy Hamill Interviews Herself,” a poem that examines both the ways in which people examine themselves, and the tension between form and content. The poem is not, as suggested by its title, an interview. The real Hamill did not give it. Yet *my* Hamill does interview herself, and her responses are as

unorthodox as they are evocative. Learning to skate becomes a struggle to “leave first and last” with “the man [who] brings his Zamboni.” The abandonment of a former coach is equated with the drawing of breath, the “arabesque” that “equal[s] leg and lung.” To love skating is to meditate on the effort involved—the “[clench] of something white, bladed” during performance.

These answers are not “answers” in any traditional sense. Even though I am not Hamill, I speak for her, draw upon her biographical “truth,” and “respond” with her lexicon. Her answers are my answers. Therein lies the koan, the tension between form and content. Its form is an internal monologue on process disguised as an internal monologue on skating. Its content is a lie dictated by the form. Its persona is an obvious fiction. The poem skates between self-reflection and meta-commentary. My obedience to formal rules paradoxically allowed me to subvert those rules. I didn’t write about Dorothy Hamill and figure skating—I wrote about myself.

Of course, I wasn’t conscious of this in the beginning. Rather, I was enamored of my own inventiveness, and the positive feedback from my colleagues only served to inflate my ego. Their support (and my pride) convinced me to continue the Hamill cycle. I began collecting forms, obstructions, and constraints for use in future poems. No rule, I swore, would be too hard.

This smug declaration implies that the Hamill poems—and, by extension, all of the works in *Petticoat Government*—are little more than clever formal excursions, haphazardly arranged and presented as a collection. Nothing could be further from the truth. Although both the Hamill cycle and *Petticoat Government* originated in a “look-what-I-can-do” attitude, they transformed into something bigger, more profound. I began

to reflect on how rules shaped text, and how text could shape rules in turn. The tension already present in “Dorothy Hamill Interviews Herself,” not to mention every formally restrictive poem I have written, revealed itself as my primary concern. Ultimately, my goal is to use form to critique itself, to show that content is both independent of, and wholly dependent upon, the rules governing the text.

The stress I place on structure should not be read as a dismissal of the importance of emotional resonance. Rather, I seek to express what is real and meaningful within formal constraints. A large part of *Petticoat Government*'s challenge lay in the positioning of arbitrary, even accidental, materials to communicate the personal issues I struggle with on a daily basis. It is tough enough to write a poem that combines Zambonis and Zen meditation, and it is even tougher for the poet to reflect her emotional state while writing such a poem. The ability to perform this kind of self-revelation within structural confines is perhaps the most marked change in my work to date.

This realization came months later—after I had grown disenchanted with the cycle. No rule was too hard, but I hadn't considered that the result might not be good. Then a friend suggested a new Hamill poem with the following requirements: a line from a Shakespearean play; the exclamation “send me a harem and a sheaf of villanelles”; the words *vacuole* and *apocalyptique*; and the image of a “Victorian invalid” surrounded by “*precious things*.” These elements combined to form “Dorothy Hamill's Guide to Practical Demonology.”

I was disappointed with the poem at first, but during revision I began to see an intriguing pattern. Hamill is often described in labels: athlete, figure skater, gold medalist, American sweetheart, fashion pioneer, Ice Capade queen, product

spokesperson, etc. Yet there is more to her than these labels can communicate. Each one is a form that dictates perception, behavior. Compare these labels with the sonnet: readers expect a sonnet to rhyme, have fourteen lines in iambic pentameter, meditate on love, turn, etc. When Hamill is a spokesperson, she must represent her product. As a fashion pioneer, she must be glamorous. The Hamill of “Dorothy Hamill’s Guide to Practical Demonology” is reduced to “a ‘77 doll, another shelf-rider” incapable of action or reaction. She can neither stop the hands that “[shape] camels with [her] waist,” nor respond to the eyes that “graze [her] neck.” In this form, she can only imagine—and it is only in her imagination that she is satisfied.

I identify with this poetic Hamill who resists inherited forms. More precisely, I *am* this Hamill. I am also the visitor of “Aggressive Pesto Warfare” and “Observing the Professional Visitor,” the artist of “Portrait of the Artist as Order *Cetacea*” and “Portrait of the Artist as Failed Bulimic,” the plastic dinosaurs of “The Anklyosaur Affirmation” and “Make-Believe,” the lost traveler of “*Par Avion*,” and every individual who populates *Petticoat Government*. Even though Hamill was the first to answer the questions that underscore this collection, it was always Tiffany Noonan asking them.

The Hamill cycle is the source of *Petticoat Government*, but there is more to the collection than Dorothy Hamill. Perhaps three of the most unusual pieces in the collection are “The Trouble with Correspondence,” “Gloss: Two Interviews,” and “*Par Avion*.” Surely they all articulate the collection’s interest in the female, but I didn’t include them solely for that reason. As previously stated, the issues I take up in *Petticoat Government* are ones that I have been addressing for years. If I included every text I had ever written on the female struggle with the self and self-representation, the collection would likely

resemble the slapdash anthology implied by my declaration, “No rule is too hard.”

Instead, they are akin to the Hamill cycle—the culmination of my experiments with form and content.

“The Trouble with Correspondence,” a memoir that (literally) “corresponds” my quest for faith with a years-long weight struggle, comes in the middle—immediately after the artist’s brief but dreadful confession in “Portrait of the Artist as Failed Bulimic.”

Although the essay revisits witchcraft, the subject matter from my first collection, it does so without the veneer of fiction. No names or incidents are changed; everyone is as they are, and were, to me. The confessional nature of the piece—with its insights into my religious beliefs, concerns about the effectiveness of my practice, reflections on weight, and thoughts on fat stereotypes—brings an unadorned honesty to a collection littered with personae.

Yet my cross-genre and multi-genre propensities have made me suspicious of the ways readers tend to divide and subdivide the genres. Traditionally, nonfiction is read as “true” and “real” in a way that fiction is not. Poetry is often read like nonfiction. Still, one cannot always equate the speaker of a poem with its author. Similarly, the authorial “self” of nonfiction is filtered through memory, bias, attention, etc. The “I” is always, in some way, fictitious. All writing, regardless of genre, participates in what John Dufresne, in his writing manual of the same name, calls “the lie that tells a truth”—a fiction that approximates something concrete about life, self, and other abstractions.

Following the autopsy of “anatomy”—which ends with a female body, “*exhibit c,*” displayed “piecemeal / to bearbare”—“Gloss: Two Interviews” queries its sexuality. Calling back to “Dorothy Hamill Interviews Herself,” I use the interview form to

examine the ways I examine myself. This time, however, the questions were also sent to *Playboy*'s Jamie Malanowski and *Redbook*'s Stacy Morrison. They were not chosen randomly. Both magazines have published literary fiction and commercialized the female as a sum of her physical attributes. Yet it is Malanowski, the male editor of a men's magazine, who responds with effusive candor on the diminished role of fiction in popular culture, the rise of service journalism, and the reading habits of women. Morrison, the female editor of a woman's magazine, remains silent.

My inclusion of "Gloss: Two Interviews" serves several purposes. It continues my extended interrogation of form and content. It hints that perhaps so-called "sexist" men's magazines like *Playboy* actually respect women; after all, it teaches its (male and female) audience to be sophisticated and literate, not just attractive and good in bed. Most importantly, though, "Gloss" opens the door to self-critique. The questions are carefully tailored to speak only to publishing practices. I avoid issues of female sexuality and commercialization. Even the conclusions I gesture toward are somewhat misleading. It is not easy to claim that people subscribe to *Playboy* for its prose—in spite of Hugh Hefner's assertion that he "would be the publisher of a literary magazine" without his *Playmates* ("I only buy it for the articles"). In my interviews, I, too, use received ideas about audience, sexuality, and literature to pigeonhole the female.

Concluding *Petticoat Government* is "*Par Avion*," a ten-part sequence of postcard poems to an unnamed lover. In the voice of a female traveler, "*Par Avion*" proposes that what defines the self is as protean as a starlet's lipstick. What begins as culture shock becomes estrangement in the wake of innumerable external stimuli. The traveler is a tourist, a buyer, a saint with "a faceless wooden [bust]," the gardens of Chaumont-sur-

Loire, the installations of Pamela Moulton, André Breton, Rodin's *Eve*, and everything else she encounters. Lost, she seeks herself in history, art, landscape, poetry, commerce, and other people. Meanwhile, her "right hand never changes." It cannot because it must write on behalf of its owner. The hand is her only remaining link to the world. Without it, she can never hope to (re)discover her identity at home or abroad.

The phrase *par avion* means, literally, "for flight" and is used to identify airmail in France. My choice to title this sequence "*Par Avion*" speaks directly to my engagement of the postcard form. Still, this airmail label communicates more than a postage price. Because the poem is for flight, it is both ephemeral and enduring. Like postcards themselves, the poem's sections record instances and persist as physical reminders of the places/states the traveler has experienced.

One of my many lies that tell a truth is that poetry and nonfiction are different genres. The truth is, "*Par Avion*" is nonfiction. Composed over a three-week trip to France, the "essay" reconfigures journal entries to address my simultaneous abandonment of, and longing for, home. I witnessed every scene, lived every disaffected moment. The unnamed lover is my fiancé, and he really has "mooncrater feet." If asked, I can produce the "*confits de vin*" and the "bracelet [of] 16 rubber-strung solstices." I even edited the sections to fit onto the postcards I collected throughout France. Unfortunately, this truth is less interesting than the lie. To equate the speaker with the author is to reduce the work to a label—to force it into the form it means to subvert.

This is the heart of *Petticoat Government*.

Does this mean that my past attitudes to—and experiments with—form, content, and language still live within that heart? It is hard to tell. Whatever the case, one cannot

deny that this thought experiment suggests that my work is cross-eyed—looking back at the same time it looks forward. The “truth” is, I am Tiffany Noonan and *Petticoat Government*. I can only critique conventions when I can critique my understanding of them. To break the rules, I must obey them. A challenge, but no rule is and can ever be too hard.

The instruments have taken their final readings, and the equations have run through their required iterations.

It is time, at last, to open.

To (re)discover the contents.

To see which (im)possibilities occur.

To find (in)consistencies between the results.

To assign names, language, and form to what exists—alive or dead—inside.

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Petticoat.

A woman.

“There’s a petticoat will prove to be the cause of this.” —*Hawley Smart:*
Struck Down, chap. xi.

Petticoat Government.

Femalerule.

—E. Cobham Brewer, *Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*

*

What boundless power [poetry] had for displacement, transformation,
evasion! Why travel, when a rhyme levels off a mountain, when an adjective
peoples a country, when an assonance causes the whole earth to swing out?

The poem was a sky, and the poet held the broomstick.

Yes, he can created for himself many restrictions.

All that changed.

—Henri Michaux, “Poets Travel”

THE HISTORY OF THICK

I am of short stature, somewhat thick; if it would help,
imagine me a forest of bushes, pointed thorns, thick-bodied butterflies.

My stamens have remarkably thick filaments, as suggested by my name,
which is Greek — oh, those thick-haired Greeks —

for “thick-stamen.”

Among those women seen in the thickest fire

— among thick graves of unquiet aspiring statesmen —
lie more delicate sufferers. We breathe an air thick,

infected, joy-dispelling. Then falls thick rain,
a thrilling region of thick-ribbed ice,

the thick boom of the sea up from the rocks.
Some are “space-thick” — that is,

one quarter so thick as the body is high.
Though such spaces are seldom cast, we call them thick.

I am one so thick-fingered that I miss the keys;
my throat one thick, guttural vowel.

Though thick-tongued still, I speak clearly —
the error of my body so thick and so palpable, I need not speak more.

PREDICTABLE CONTEMPLATIONS OF THE BODY AS PLANET AS BODY

Fat people make better planets because they have gravitational pull. Large iron core. Magnetic fields blocking solar wind.

High metallicity in their stars, spitting off sparks, proplyds, secrets of the Drake equation.

The notion of a habitable zone may have to be expanded or discarded as too restricting.

Low mass means less life retention. No atmosphere. Too smooth to stay that way. Cue the eruptions, quakes. Then, geological death; no energy to crank.

The Fermi paradox refutes astrobiology's assertion that I'm hot, and extrasolar bodies grow sexier every day.

Poets consider themselves habitable, unaware they're the most hostile environments.

DOROTHY HAMILL INTERVIEWS HERSELF

Why learn to skate?

You can't
close your grape-round mouth.

Summers like fingers:
pointing, frosting. Swallow.

Let them clothe your throat,
edges and all. When the man
brings his Zamboni,

leave first and last.
Smoke your cigarettes.

*What do you wear now
that you've abandoned Carlo
Fassi?*

When your breath arabesques, snow
must equal leg and lung.

Love skating?
Seasons rise like two-
footed salchows—glide

flat-side left, lift right. Let easy,
string-bean snaps guide your teeth.

Even sleet forgets
its freefall; it, too, clenches
something white, bladed.

buoy

sea	yet & yet l	
& smoke		h a n d
hanging by	l light falls	b l a c k
dark so flat	into	m o o n s
— t h i s	forms	l e a v e t h i s
s l e e p	to	where does
a saffron	te	t h e
bed : salt	s u p e r m	r i p t i d e p u l l
water pull,	i m p o s e d	s a l t
riptide	over scrapes	w a t e r
— where	of	— b e d ,
anchor	highway	s a f f r o n :
does	AHEAD	a s l e e p t h i s
anchor	LEFT	flat, so dark,
anchor	TU	h a n g i n g
smooth	RN	by sea &
this		s m o k e
leave		
the buoy		
moon's	body buoy hook	
black	rust bellboy	
h		
and		
rope or—		

PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS ORDER CETACEA

I loved his hips—their bone-tangle tightness, the way they requested charcoal. Hence my offer to draw him nude. We'd already promised not to touch. I saved my hands for contour sketches, the softblack vine dividing newsprint into sweeps of muscle. It's easy to forget human shape, to remember how his voice cracked, palm imprints fresh on my thigh, lingering. All my defenses—water retention, insulation, genetics—useless. My body's *give*, sweet in theory. "Go home," he said. If being a whale is just a matter of composition or the fat pulse of a four-chambered heart, I'll rebuild myself fusiform. I can't let him see me unable to find the necessary exit leverage. So I hold my instruments tighter.

AGGRESSIVE PESTO WARFARE*for A. R.*

Nothing is worth hoarding but basil
outgrown its cruxes. I can't remember
the last time I slept in a bed. Meanwhile,
my clippings settle themselves
against mint. Each pot invades
its neighbor. I don't know their names:
creeper, ground cover, or simply not another
sleeping bag. My friends don't know
each other. Sometimes they visit,
intro themselves over a miracle
-gro & pasta cocktail, leave
their deposits in the sink. I use
what's left to set the home
inside my suitcase ablaze.

OBSERVING THE PROFESSIONAL VISITOR

She says she hoards what earns its weight
 in gas—a basil pot that flourishes
despite its car-seat soil, old paperbacks,

the promise of a bed she doesn't have
 to make. Her business cards are blank.
The men who take her in call her

“housesitter.” That name is more than
 home. Some *Romani*—all her friends
are spices. Forget the suitcase shape

beneath her sleeping bag. There's a reason
 why the trash is always at the curb,
the flowers watered, pillows in their place.

She needs owners to thank her when their cats
 leave mice; it shows that someone
cares about her work.

MULTIPLE CHOICE

What I remember from my study guide:

antediluvian is an insult for great-aunts,
proctor sounds a lot like *proctologist*,

[“the results aren’t good”]

& I place my hand to the scar on my mother’s breast divot wide
enough for 2 fingers another surgery it will be 4 perhaps
an entire hand in a space too small to tear with a pencil my
mom teaches me her vocabulary book closed later I
refresh the verbal section pretend I’m learning cognates——

DOROTHY HAMILL CONSIDERS THE GREAT VOWEL SHIFT

Hold that — “eee”
 — long as possible.
 Pull lips. Open

mouth. See how
 our tongues mat
 against roofs? So

easy! Land it
 every time! Hang
 long vowels high,

breathe wheezy. Consider
 towel bars — maybe
 tub rings. When

you (feeling queasy?)
 weave, grip consonants
 like drains slide.

I'm well aware
 how teeth involve
 themselves. Now ask

me where diphthongs
 grow. How water
 breaks while rinsing

hair. How shampoo
 matters. Why it
 lathers whether you

go air or
 use blow dryers.
 I'm turning prayer

on its ear.
 Listen. One turn,
 a lock opens.

ADVENT: TRANSFORM TIME OF THE LITTLE GIRL

I'm some sweet lolita
this morning

— or maybe my thighs
just squeezed these floral sheets to lace —

with hips so thick, you could shave
eight layers before hitting bone.

*

Eight again: my father buys me a pink pinafore.

Three hours later, I slap a spoon from his hand.

His lighter scorches the little ruffles.

I change into black pants.

*

Chart notes read, *BMI 41.2: morbidly obese. Patient smokes
"at least a pack a day." Have recommended cessation & diet regime.*

I step out to call home. A nurse compliments my
shortcake purse. Line rings; I kick stones. Hitch jeans.

Flatten three grackles against a white sky. How quickly
I've puckered, become the doily that never levels.

マリコのジレンマ

Everything I know about language
I learned from the slim backs of other girls.
Ached to hold brushes, stir deep
tea kettles — & yet each evening
I sit cross-legged before Mother. She asks,
“How is school?” “What are your friends doing?”
“Have you finally learned to tie your belt?”
Mother likes me to call her Mother
during these talks — not the *Mama-san*
I’ve heard others shout
— & she does not see me linger
on the stairs when she peeks through
our paper shades. A white tongue
scorches her hair. No, not a moon,
& there is no pilot light —
just the calligraphy of her wrists
— & my name’s fat syllabic chunks
etched in every saucer.

SUNDOG / ZODIAC OF A FINGERNAIL

If you could clip me, I would be waxing crescent / Once I was a mouth, gibbous until I closed over you / You took my name from Ptolemy — *terra australis* — / to balance me against something higher / My shape was all flats and ice / Katabatic winds rended my plateau at the edge / Interior, they moderated themselves / Sometimes the sun touched my white skin, and I burned like Brazil / My diamond dusts shimmered *carnivale* / radiation tricky as an open circuit / Now, this ridge slit through, a quick: something little, rough / The nail in front of your face slides under your waistband, parhelios to the snow

Parhelios to the snow, the nail in front of your face slides under your waistband / Now, this ridge slit through, a quick: something little, rough / My diamond dusts shimmer *carnivale*, radiation tricky as an open circuit / Sometimes I burn like Brazil when the sun touches my white skin, / and the interior moderates itself / Katabatic winds rend my polar plateau at the edge / My shape is all flats and ice / You take my name from Ptolemy — *terra australis* — to balance me against something higher / At once I am a mouth, gibbous until I close over you / I could / would / being wax crescent if you clip me

DOROTHY HAMILL, NO RELATION TO MARK

It's a challenge mixing lightsabers & Ice Capades
since they, much the same as we, are quite
unrelated——casual issues. (Example: I can say

“Chewbacca.” Teach Han & Leia pair techniques,
Hillary Spins. Recall Ben's lectures, the shape
my arms made that night in Munich. But last

names? races? *carnivale*?——never. There
are rules here: inside axels must stay single-
legged, reverses remain in practice.) Yet

we're the same tribe, aren't we? *Jedi*? Ha.
Erase the mysticism, Imperial hunts, heat
in a tauntaun's belly——we still understand

flats & winter landscapes better than mundanes.
We realize fear is sly. And we abide by three
tenets equally: never turn when leaps will impress,

every ace stashes a smuggler's heart, & a tin
bathing suit can hide a princess inside a striptease.
It's true. Tell me I'm right in less than three letters.

PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS FAILED BULIMIC

I envy

my mother's

gag reflex.

THE TROUBLE WITH CORRESPONDENCE

Ask a man off the street to describe a witch, and he might conjure a barefoot, gypsy-skirted girl. Another might imagine black-robed figures sacrificing kittens and drinking babies' blood from a cauldron. Still another might think of his landlady.

The problem of witchcraft boils down to a problem of language. Take, for example, some of the current synonyms for witch—Wiccan,¹ pagan,² neopagan,³ heathen.⁴ Despite what *The Oxford English Dictionary* and various thesauruses say, the terms aren't equivalent. Even witches don't know what to call themselves half the time.

But here's what I know: Wiccans follow a system of tenets and beliefs reconstructed in the 1950s by Gerald Gardner, an amateur anthropologist. A pagan is anyone who doesn't practice Islam, Judaism, or Christianity. Neopaganism is a subset of paganism that includes various reconstructionist, Goddess-centric, and/or polytheistic belief systems. Heathen—originally used to refer to an ignorant, non-Christian peasant—is now the reclaimed title of a Nordic-themed neopagan sect. It's like this: squares are rectangles, but a rectangle isn't always a square. Wiccans are witches, but a witch isn't always Wiccan. Witches are pagan, but a pagan may not be a witch. Or sometimes a witch is pagan—witchcraft isn't tied to religion. A person can be Christian and practice witchcraft.

The first definition of "witch" that I encountered came out of *Buckland's Complete Book of Witchcraft*, a bright blue primer accidentally shelved in my library's astrology section. I was ten at the time and obsessed with astrology. I'd started reading the daily horoscopes because they were printed next to my favorite word puzzles. At first I didn't think much of them, but eventually I noticed that their predictions came true. If my horoscope predicted an argument with

¹ Practitioners of Wicca, a religious cult of modern witchcraft (*The Oxford English Dictionary*, "wicca, *n.*" and "wiccan, *adj.* and *n.*").

² People who do not subscribe to a major or recognized religion (*Ibid.*, "pagan, *adj.* and *n.*").

³ Modern adherents of a pagan religion (*Ibid.*, "neopagan, *adj.* and *n.*").

⁴ Those do not define their religion as Judaism, Christianity, or Islam (*Ibid.*, "heathen, *adj.* and *n.*").

a superior, my teacher would give me detention. If it said I would come into money, I'd find a dollar in the yard. These insights amazed me. I didn't know how astrologers learned the future, but I was determined to figure it out.

It was during my research that I discovered Raymond Buckland's book. According to him, a witch was simply "a practitioner of witchcraft." As for "witchcraft"—well, I wasn't sure. But the descriptions seemed a lot like the Catholic rituals I knew. It didn't matter that my religious education consisted of little more than a handful of Catechism. I was a kid, naïve enough to believe that anything in a book must be universal. So, when I read *Buckland's Complete Book of Witchcraft*, something clicked. Since witchcraft looked like Catholicism, it probably looked like every other religion. Therefore, everyone practiced witchcraft, and we must all witches.

When I first began practicing, I still considered myself Catholic. I believed Jesus was my Savior, He died for my sins, and Mary petitioned God whenever I prayed the Rosary. I also kept a small altar inside my closet, left Kool-Aid and cookies outside for the fairies, and attached moon and sun charms—for Artemis and Apollo—to my favorite crucifix. There was no conflict in my belief. To me, capital-G God and Mary and Jesus hung out with the small-g gods in Heaven. They drank tea together every afternoon and played golf on the weekends. I wasn't breaking the First Commandment. Since I didn't know about witchcraft before I knew about God, all other gods came *after* Him.

Despite her devout Catholicism, my mother never told me that my practices were bad or wrong. In fact, when I asked to build a shrine in the garden, she salvaged wood from the local Home Depot, bought paints, and lent me her toolbox. I don't know what she thought. Maybe she wanted me to develop a personal relationship with God and Nature. Maybe she thought the whole "astrology and witchcraft thing" was a phase I'd outgrow.

After finishing *Buckland's Complete Book of Witchcraft*, I checked out the library's other

books on the subject: Scott Cunningham's *The Truth about Witchcraft Today*; Starhawk's *The Spiral Dance*; Ray T. Malborough's *Charms, Spells, and Formulas*. None of them said the same things Buckland had. Not even Malborough, who—according to the mini biography on the back of the book—studied under Buckland. Then a group of classmates snatched *Charms, Spells, and Formulas* out of my hands, called me a devil-worshiper, and threw the book into the trash. Less than a week later, Mom asked me to stop stealing her spices and mixing “potions” in her food processor.

That's when I discovered that witchcraft wasn't as universal as I thought. But I didn't outgrow it; I learned to hide it. The charms came off my crucifix. My oils went into perfume bottles. When I borrowed witchcraft books from the library, I made brown-paper jackets to hide their covers. I stopped talking about fairies and goddesses and rituals.

It didn't take me long to get very good at hiding what I believed, what I was.

*

Many witches derive their definition of witchcraft from Aleister Crowley's definition of magick—“the Science and Art of causing Change to occur in conformity with Will.”⁵ It sounds vague because it is; the language is designed to be obscure. What this means is that magick—and witchcraft, by extension—allows its practitioner to make things happen through sheer determination. The so-called “Science and Art” are techniques and tools that make it easier for the witch to reach that determined state. These techniques and tools range from the ordinary to the downright wacky—chaos theory, neuro-linguistic programming, graveyard dirt, “tongue of dog.”⁶ Knowing one's Will, and how to tap into it, is key to being a good, effective witch. One cannot

⁵ *Magick: Liber ABA, Book Four*, 126. Crowley adds the *-k* to distinguish his “Science and Art” from magic, which he defines as sleight of hand and other stage tricks performed for entertainment.

⁶ cf. *Magical Herbalism*, 212.

practice witchcraft without understanding it; otherwise, no change can occur in the world.

But explaining this is hard. I can talk all I want about Will and magick, rituals and tools; it sounds hokey to most people. Witchcraft, I tell them, boils down to a simple equation: faith plus practice yields results. Catholics recite novenas and little old ladies form prayer circles based on this idea. But somehow, this answer isn't adequate. I get better reactions, exclamations of "I get it now," when I intellectualize witchcraft—as if knowing a bunch of definitions makes me a believer. What I know is meaningless to my faith. It doesn't matter that I can distinguish deosil from widdershins or a pentagram from a pentacle. What matters is the Will, and what I want to achieve through that vehicle.

For years, a major expression of my Will has been a desire to lose weight. I spent much of my childhood fretting about my body. When I took gymnastics, my coach said to quit because I had the wrong build. Just before my senior year of high school, my mother offered to buy me a whole new wardrobe if I'd "just lose fifty pounds." I broke my wrist, and the doctor said, "You have the densest bones I've ever seen in a girl. I wouldn't be surprised if you grew up to be six feet tall." Well, I didn't grow to be six feet tall—not even close—but I refuse to say I have dense bones. It sounds too much like "big-boned."

*

Witches like things to correspond to one another—colors, elements, directions, even names. They believe correspondence allows objects and ideas to sync with one's Will more easily. If I wanted to cast a love spell, I'd consult a correspondence chart to figure out what represents that expression of the Will. It would tell me that love is traditionally connected with the color red—think roses, valentines. Red is the color of fire, which rules the summer season. Its direction is South, its archangel is Michael, and its alchemical symbol is an equilateral triangle with one

upturned point. During the ritual to set the spell in motion, I'd light red candles anointed with rose oil, invoke Michael into my circle—along with goddesses like Aphrodite for beauty and Hera for fidelity. Maybe dress my altar in red poppies and sunflowers or tie red ribbons to my pinkies, the part of the hand associated with fire and passion.

If I drew up a correspondence chart for my life, my hatred of “big-boned” would connect with my favorite golfer, Phil Mickelson. Whenever he plays in a major tournament, I watch the coverage. If I can't watch, I follow the reports. Every year, I root for him to win the Masters and take home that iconic green jacket. Sometimes, I wear my Masters visor when I watch the Golf Channel, pretend to be a hardcore fan. Despite this, what I actually know about golf is restricted to a smattering of terminology, the brand names of a few clubs, miscellaneous putt-putt techniques, and the “Expert” course in *Wii Sports*.

The first time I saw him on television, I thought three things: *Hey, that's a pretty handsome guy; Man, he can play; and He's got a bit of a belly on him.* What I liked about Phil was that he fit my golfer stereotype—a pleasant, well-groomed man with just a touch of pudg. Like he had the money to live and eat well. Since that first sighting, he's lost weight; he looks very healthy, more attractive than ever. When he stoops to pick up his ball now, I no longer see those spare inches at his waist. He swings his driver with well-defined arms. But I prefer the old Phil. He made me believe that, in spite of my extra pounds, I could be just as accomplished as him.

But the trouble with correspondence is twofold: not everyone uses the same language to talk about the same things, and there's plenty of dissent on what connects to what.

*

There are a lot of nice ways to call someone fat besides “big-boned”—Rubenesque,

zaftig, voluptuous, curvaceous, plus-sized, full-figured. But medical scientists classify me as “morbidly obese,” at least 100 pounds above ideal weight and having a body mass index (BMI) of 40 or higher. They say obesity leads to a variety of health problems, including a five-to-seven times increased risk of heart disease and diabetes, a doubled risk of early death, and immeasurable social and psychological consequences. These medical scientists mean that the obese live, are treated, and think of themselves as subhumans.

Society tells us that fat people are usually poor, stupid, flawed in character and mind. Activists in the fat acceptance movement call discrimination based on one’s adipose tissue “sizeism.” These activists purport that such discrimination exists because our culture ascribes negative attributes to weight. This idea that one cannot have a fulfilling life with extra weight is based in an unrealistic, Photoshop-era aesthetic.

“It wasn’t always like that,” they claim. “There was a time in history when large women were desirable. Size meant money and a robustness that would guarantee survival in childbirth. But now, in a world of airbrushes and personal trainers, thinness is the measure of wealth, health, and success.” Fat people are too fleshy for life—too fleshy to live.

There are several groups working to combat sizeism—the most famous of which is the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance (NAAFA)—and they are making some progress. In 2007 Penn and Teller focused an episode of their Showtime series *Bullshit!* on the “obesity myth.” Doctors are beginning to promote Health at Every Size (HAES), an approach to health and well-being that accepts individuals regardless of body size and type. The 2008 winner of England’s Miss Surrey pageant was Chloe Marshall, a 17-year-old plus-size model.

Still, for every enlightened episode of *Bullshit!*, there’s a new season of *The Biggest Loser*. For every Chloe Marshall, there’s a Monica Grenfell calling her “fat, lazy and a poster girl for ill health.”⁷ For every doctor promoting HAES, there are three telling me, “I don’t think

⁷ *The Daily Mail Online*. 3 Apr. 2008 <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/pages/live/femail/article.html?in_article_id=554870&in_page_id=1879>.

you're physically capable of taking exercise," "You'll die if you stay that fat," and "Lay off all the goddamn food."

*

I was seventeen, away at boarding school, 175 pounds, and a size 16 when I read Silver RavenWolf for the first time. I barely ate—not because I was experimenting with anorexia, but because I spent my food budget on books about witchcraft. I called myself a witch and wanted to know as much as possible about what that meant. I cast a love spell and attracted a boyfriend, cast success spells and excelled in my classes. My spells for weight loss, however, failed. My mother had already made her wardrobe offer.

She doesn't know it, but RavenWolf perpetuated my belief that fat witches were bad—false, ugly unbelievers in the Goddess' grace. I marveled at her illustrations, pen-and-ink representations of ethereal men and women oozing goodness and beauty, and thought that was what witches should be. A good witch who craved thinness would be thin; witchcraft would make it happen.

RavenWolf responds to questions about her illustrations—including whether or not she resembles them—in a chapter on networking with other witches: "No," she writes, "[my drawings] are the product of wish fulfillment. If I did look like that, I sure wouldn't be working for a living!"⁸ Author photographs demonstrate that she is hardly fat. As a slender, attractive middle-aged woman, she has little to worry about. But upon reading this and comparing her art to her photographs, I thought, *If someone like Silver RavenWolf has to work hard and hide behind illustrations, what can I expect?*

A later chapter on divination characterizes a fraudulent fortuneteller as

⁸ *To Ride a Silver Broomstick*, 137.

a dark, sloe-eyed, pleasantly plump female with tons of bangles and bracelets dripping from her body. She exudes mystery, naughtiness, and has the best set of half-revealed breasts this side of the Mississippi. . . . [S]he is not exactly the type you would base your life decisions on, because she does not precisely appear to be of the trustworthy sort.⁹

RavenWolf's language sets up a binary. The fortuneteller is held in direct opposition to the "good witch" who uses divination as an integral part of her magickal practice. Fortunetelling is bad, divination is good. Fat is bad, thin is good. After all, people don't base their lives around a fat girl's recommendations; fat girls aren't credible.

RavenWolf's fat fortuneteller is also dark and crooked-eyed, which in RavenWolf's view makes the fortuneteller even more awful. A true witch, she says, is light in skin, hair, eyes, and body. All I had in my favor was paleness.

Worst of all is a throwaway joke at the end of a section on country versus city witchcraft. As one might expect, many modern practitioners of witchcraft don't have access to large swaths of open, private land and must limit their practice to their homes and other small, often enclosed, spaces. Still, a lot of practitioners think that "indoor witchcraft" is somehow inferior. RavenWolf debunks this myth of "Barbie Witch on Walton Mountain"¹⁰ by saying, "It is a Midsummer Night's Dream. And that's all it is folks, a dream."¹¹ There's nothing wrong with practicing indoors, she asserts. To think otherwise is to buy into a fantasy of what witchcraft should be. Modern witches are not their historical predecessors and should not try to be.

But then I read this parenthetical aside: "Don't laugh too hard; the Acquisitions Manager at [my publisher] Llewellyn . . . looks like Barbie and she's a darn good Witch to boot! So yes, Virginia, there are some gorgeous witches. Eat your heart out!"¹² That's all I needed—to eat

⁹ Ibid., 148.

¹⁰ *To Stir a Magick Cauldron*, 261.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., 261-2.

something else. To glorify a false image of a witch. Jealousy of this Acquisitions Manager replaced my previous satisfaction with my bookshelf altar. I might as well be a Halloween hag if there were only *some* gorgeous, darn good witches out there.

*

Two years later, I was a sophomore in college, a size 18, and a good fifteen pounds heavier. My library included dozens of publications on witchcraft. I still kept my altar on a bookshelf. I was a fat girl striving, and failing, to be Barbie Witch.

It was around this time that I encountered Angel, the dark, sloe-eyed high priestess of a coven near Baton Rouge, Louisiana. She wore Tigger overalls under a leather jacket during our first meeting and was only five years older than me—hardly my ideal image of a witch queen. I quickly realized, however, that she was a brilliant, well-read witch despite her youthful exterior. Not to mention curvaceous in the truest sense of the word. She enchanted me, and I asked if I could study witchcraft under her. I had taken all I could from books and figured that since she was a high priestess, she could fill the gaps in my education.

Right away, she welcomed me as if I'd always belonged. I started attending her classes and rituals. Angel praised my knowledge of witchcraft. I knew my books inside and out. Could rattle off names, dates, vocabulary, and correspondence charts on command. But even though I'd out-memorized every member of her coven, I still felt like an outsider. They had taken vows, were members of her spiritual family. She had chosen them. I was only a well-liked visitor.

Within a few months of my introduction to Angel, I asked if I could interview her and have access to her archives. I wanted to write a book about what I'd learned and was learning. A part of me believed that if I could do that, I could answer my questions of faith. That writing the history of Angel's coven would help me clarify what I believed and understand why I wasn't

getting any thinner. The logic seemed sound enough—set down the coven’s beliefs, and discover your own. Learn the expression of Angel’s Will, gain control over yours.

Angel liked the idea and granted my request. That’s when I learned that her coven was actually several covens under the umbrella of her leadership. Each coven was run by a Direct Priestess that answered only to her. The Priestesses, women under the Directs, ran the day-to-day affairs, and the initiated men served as their guardians, helpers, and friends. The High Priestess’ job was to be the covens’ spiritual guide and oversee its large-scale functions. To ensure that she could devote every hour to being High Priestess, the coven members supported her financially. Angel was a full-time witch.

When I asked how the covens began, she related the history—more like a myth, really—of its origins. How their first high priestess became the black sheep of the Old World witches by breaking their traditions. How this mysterious progenitor fled France with her followers, traveled across Europe. Then, their eventual immigration to the United States. Persecution. And, the covens’ latest betrayal, going public.

“The old laws state,” she said, “that our knowledge is not mundane knowledge. By taking the covens public, we’ve alienated ourselves from our mother covens forever.”

“Do you really believe that?” It all seemed so far-fetched.

“Yes, but even if the story isn’t true, it serves its purpose.”

“And that is?”

“To teach the values we prize in our coven members: strength, determination, pride, and a willingness to fly in the face of convention.”

I liked this. It made me feel better about not fitting the RavenWolf model of the good witch. And hearing Angel’s stories made me think that she could transform me if I joined her coven. Once I learned her values, surely I would succeed in my weight-loss goals.

*

Angel and I spent hours discussing every topic that came to mind during these sessions: religion, literature, pop culture, our daily lives. I complained about recent troubles with ATMs; every time I used my card to get money, the machine broke.

She laughed. “Sometimes that happens. It’s a side effect of being a witch—your magick leaks out into the world.”

“Really?”

“Yes. It’s why I don’t wear a watch. They always break.”

The comment passed with no further discussion. A couple of weeks later, I visited again to continue my lessons and interviews. Once we sat in her living room, I noticed a watch on her wrist.

“I thought you didn’t wear watches,” I said.

“I don’t, but I wanted to wear this one. It was a gift.”

Our usual talk continued; I never thought to question her choice of accessories. We were deep in some debate or another when I heard a sound like pressure releasing from a two-liter soda. I turned to the kitchen, half-expecting to see one of Angel’s priestesses getting a drink. When I didn’t see anyone, I turned back to Angel and gave her a look.

She held out her wrist and said, “This one held out a little longer than most.”

What I had heard was the face of her watch exploding. The crystal was a spiderweb of cracks, and the hands of the watch dangled uselessly from the central dial. Her own hands had rested on her chair the entire time.

If it was a trick, it was a good one. If it wasn’t, it was a miracle. Either way, the event convinced me to join her coven. I didn’t think she would let me—was certain she’d say I wasn’t coven material. Sure, I was smart enough, but the whole smart thing was a way to make people

forget that I was fat. It wasn't so much that I thought being thin was an initiation requirement. I was just used to hiding.

But when I indicated all this to Angel, she smiled and shook her head. "No, you're one of the most beautiful, intelligent women I've ever met. And one hell of a witch. I would be honored to have you be a part of my coven, my family."

*

I was initiated on May 5, 2000. I wore all black—a loose-fitting silk blouse and long skirt purchased specifically for the ceremony. The shirt was a size 18; the skirt, an 18/20.

*

A few weeks later, Angel announced that our next coven social event would be "Topless Movie Night."

"What does that mean?" I asked.

"Exactly what I said."

I was still confused. Did she mean we were going to watch movies featuring topless people, or were we going to watch movies while topless? Turns out Angel meant the latter, but the former was also true; the movie she'd chosen was *Gladiator*.

Topless Movie Night was designed to be a trust exercise. Those present would be working together as covenmates and would have to be comfortable with each other. Also, we needed to trust ourselves, build confidence, remove the fear of nudity and exposure. The idea was that everyone would spend the first fifteen minutes or so covering up. Then, hands would drop. Bellies and breasts would emerge.

That night, seven people—two men, five women—watched the film. If a doctor had walked in, he would have classified four as morbidly obese. The other three would have been relegated to the obese category. Even Angel.

But a doctor didn't walk in. A pizza guy did.

I don't remember which woman actually fetched the pizza when it arrived, but none of us remembered to put our shirts back on. When she opened the door, the delivery boy flinched. I'm sure it looked like something out of cheesy porn—a room full of half-naked people.

He looked around the room and said, "Wow, I need to hang out here. Y'all are cool."

We paid the man, took our pizza inside, watched him leave, ate, laughed about the whole thing. No one knew what he thought as he got in his car and drove off, but I remember thinking how nice it was that he never mentioned our bodies.

*

My statue of the goddess Diana, the one at the center of my altar, has a broken hand. The crystal ball I keep beside Diana is flecked with tiny, almost invisible, inclusions. My silver chalice is black with oxidation. There's a chip in my pentacle.

I collect flawed things. My drawers are filled with bric-a-brac: scraps of art paper, glass, computer accessories, broken toys. I pretend I will remake them but rarely do.

When I moved to Florida—away from Angel, my coven, my family—I gained at least 40 more pounds. I wore size 24 jeans. My doctor, frustrated by my weight, thought I was trying to eat myself to death. But when he told me to "lay off all the goddamn food," I challenged him to a dance contest. "I'll get winded first," I said, "but I bet you a hundred dollars you'll break your fucking feet before you out-dance me."

He apologized; I did, too.

Three years ago, I left Florida for Mississippi. Since then, I've lost 50 pounds and am back down to an 18. I walk a lot, go to the gym. I can crunch 125 pounds on the sit-up machine and press more than half my weight with my legs. The jeans I wore when I first arrived fall off my hips. Shirts I haven't been able to button in years fit again. I am no longer morbidly obese.

But I am still *fat*.

In weight-loss lore, there's something called "the plateau." You reach it once the techniques you use no longer work, and your size stays constant. At that point, you have to make a decision—either step up and risk falling, or stay on even ground. I've hit the plateau and am afraid to step up. I ask myself why. If my desire has truly been to lose weight, then I am a bad witch for staying on that even ground. But even ground means that I can call this small success a success. If I try harder and fail, it won't be a success anymore.

Sometimes I question my faith, wonder if what I know is the same as what I believe. I tell myself that I am healthy and the doctors only *believe* that I'll die young. But they say they *know* it, that I must diet or die. How many times have I thought, *If only I could shave this layer of fat off my belly to change their minds*. That's not possible with witchcraft. No spell can whittle me into the shape they want.

According to standard correspondence charts, I am prone to mysticism, emotional outbursts, and food addictions because I am a Pisces. But correspondence isn't an exact Science or Art. Just because I know this doesn't mean I have to believe it. The problem is, I do. I like to think that, even if I'm as flawed as the things I keep, I'll get around to remaking myself. That I know my Will. That results are a matter of faith and practice. But I've gotten so good at hiding, at saying what I know versus what I believe, that I'm not sure where to find myself, my body, or my faith.

DOROTHY HAMILL'S GUIDE TO PRACTICAL DEMONOLOGY
for W. W.

Imagine me in the hands of a Victorian invalid,
skating among his *precious things*: gold-plate

loofa, anthology of fans, first-edition *apocalpytique*.
He bends me, keeps me fit, shapes camels

with my waist. In winter, he recites Shakespeare
("And if my legs were two such riding-rods. . .")

as his wife shouts into her rosetone cell.
("Daddy, send me a harem and a sheaf of villanelles!")

He makes me into a '77 doll, another shelf-rider.
I don't blame him; even Solomon would bottle

my knees if he could. I can live imagining
the way his eyes graze my neck, the way his lashes

sweep dust from my collar. Each touch like a vacuole
maintaining pressure—each whisper, a needle.

THE DICTATOR OF RECORDS

If he leads a cow by stolen leash upstairs, it can't walk
down & will remain in his quarters. I've always proceeded

as if the leash has been around my throat the whole time.
He is, after all, my tea-wrangler: *Generalissimo*, husband

of this house. There was a time when he brought shells,
warm chocolate, tiny cup-shaped likes & trifles. I forgot

how his hand could slip so lightly from me to the bedside,
scraping past these strange beasts he guides through our room.

I've waited twenty-seven years for recognition of the scissors,
mismatched socks, & police states within me. Look—even now,

frogs leap from the mug's well. The cow wavers in my reflection.
Lights out; I dream of the chimera our bodies once coupled into.

LITTLE KEY

The clavicle turns
visible below
They orgasm
It cannot qualify

Bone is first
in embryos,
young fruits

Over time,
to buck against
Public observers
hardening after

like its Latin name
some women's skins.
by force of will.
as masturbation.

to process, form
ossify by planting
in glass boxes.

women learn
their chairs.
note the final
years of rotation.

anatomy

this shell of chest

exhibit a:

- (a)
 - (f) light*light*
 - (t)
 - (e)
 - (r)
- (n) entry
 - wound
 - entry . would

exhibit

- (b:) danced*dances*
 - (l)
 - (r)
- (o)

where birds nest in

- (t)
- (h) inks
- where lungs should be
- (s) hips
- (l)oose lips
- sluiced
- (s)wear

two sisters
 open blouse b(l)ack

same as (t)high*highs*

exhibit c:

- daughter
- (ed.)
- piecemeal
- to bear*bare*

GLOSS: TWO INTERVIEWS

“What is the proper response of a woman looking at *Playboy*?”

—Denise Duhamel, “House-Sitting”

One.

(from a series of emails between the author and *Playboy*'s managing editor, Jaime Malanowski)

TN: *Playboy* has a history of publishing risky—some might say innovative—fiction. Would you say that this tradition continues today?

JM: Sure. Just in the last couple of years, along with master storytellers like John Updike, Margaret Atwood, Jane Smiley and Stephen King, we happily published established-but-edgy writers like Chuck Palahniuk and T.C. Boyle, as well as exciting new voices like Sam Lipsyte, Tony D'Souza, Michelle Richmond, and Jess Walter.

TN: Do you have a preferred aesthetic?

JM: For our fiction, we look for plot-driven stories. We want a certain drama in our short stories, and we want vivid protagonists. We want events to take place in these stories, or even action. We don't want stories to be about a person's interior life.

TN: Do you think the rise of nonfiction has contributed to the decline in the amount of fiction published in *Playboy*, or are there other factors at work behind the scenes?

JM: Has there been a decline in the amount of fiction published in *Playboy*? I don't perceive one, but there has been a decline in the culture of short fiction. Look to the 1950s and 1960s—there were lots of general interest magazines and lots of writers trying to make a living writing for them. Lots of those magazines—*Holiday*, *Look*, *The Saturday Evening Post*—closed. With fewer places to publish, fewer writers tried to fill the remaining spots. Fewer writers, less quality, less innovation. Short story success depends on an ecosystem of readers, writers and publishers. That system has shrunk—and not so many people miss it.

TN: Your answer also touches on a question that has been brought up by my fiction-writing colleagues—namely, where can short stories find an audience willing to invest the time and attention required. The literary magazines have pretty much cornered that market, but my impression is that glossy magazines are still considered the “mint-maker” for a literary career in prose. That is, once you get your work in a place like *Playboy* or *The Atlantic*, you're pretty much set. Would you agree with this?

JM: It's an absurd, naïve idea. Very few writers are ever set, by which I mean that their force of reputation is pretty much enough to get them published. Most writers, even ones with long records of achievement and success, are only as good as their next idea. And a person who has been published once in *The Atlantic* or *Playboy*? Very good. Congratulations. What else can you show me?

TN: Regarding the amount of fiction that *Playboy* publishes, my understanding—based on my

research—is that *Playboy* used to publish as many as three stories per issue.

JM: You are correct. Throughout the 50s, 60s, and 70s, *Playboy* published three or four stories an issue. It is true that many of these pieces were very short and were slight humor pieces. But as recently as 1988 we published twenty stories a year. Even now, in our big December and January holiday issues, we may publish more than one story.

Another reason that there's less space for fiction is that magazines do lots more service journalism—telling people what to buy, how to dress, where to travel, etc. Also, what people think of as funny has changed. In the past, *Playboy* might run a funny two-page story, 1,500-2,000 words long, something you'd sit down and read. Today we're more apt to use those two pages for an article on "How to Have the Perfect Clambake," or to do something funny that is a lot more visual. Something you'd be more apt to "look at" than "read."

TN: *Playboy* can—and does—publish some of contemporary fiction's biggest names. Why, then, does the magazine continue to offer its annual College Fiction Award?

JM: Why do you think? It's enormously popular. It helps establish a connection between the magazine and students. And it gives us an early look at young talent.

TN: I know that you cannot speak to *Redbook's* specific editorial practices because you do not work there. However, I have noticed that while *Playboy*, a men's magazine, continues to publish top-notch fiction, *Redbook* and other women's magazines have deemphasized their previous commitment to fiction. Do you think this is merely an editorial move to sell issues, or does it have something to do with a change in women's reading practices and/or the fiction market at large?

JM: Sorry, I have no insight in *Redbook's* editorial practices. Based on what I know of women's reading habits, I'd say women are reading a lot of novels of all genres. And while they also read a lot of magazines, they do not read magazines for fiction. They are looking for a quicker, breezier read, and for service features.

But it's not just women's magazines that are deemphasizing fiction. *The Atlantic* all but dropped fiction a year or so ago. Here's a thought—call the American Society of Magazine Editors (try to speak to Marlene Kahan) and ask how many total submissions for this year's National Magazine Awards they received in the categories of Reporting, Feature Writing, Essay, Service Feature, and Fiction. I'll bet they got thirty or fewer nominations for fiction, and two to three times that in the other categories.

TN: I did contact Marlene Kahan as you suggested, and she said that you are absolutely right. There are far fewer nominations for Fiction in the National Magazine Awards than for other categories, and this has been the case for many years.

Thank you very much for your time and attention; your assistance is much appreciated. Who knows—maybe there's a bit of nonfiction in this for me.

Two.

(from a series of emails between the author and *Redbook's* editor-in-chief, Stacy Morrison)

TN: *Redbook* once published fiction by Dashiell Hammett, Edith Wharton, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Jack London, and Sinclair Lewis. Has the rise of nonfiction contributed to the decline in the amount of fiction being published in *Redbook*, or are there other factors at work?

SM:

TN: What is your preferred aesthetic in regards to the fiction that *Redbook* publishes?

SM:

TN: Certainly you cannot speak to the editorial practices of other magazines, but I have noticed that while *Playboy*, a men's magazine, continues to publish top-notch fiction alongside its nudes, *Redbook* and other women's magazines have deemphasized their previous commitment to fiction. Do you think this represents a change in women's reading practices?

SM:

TN: Who are some of your favorite authors to appear in *Redbook*?

SM:

TN: Does *Redbook* receive many unsolicited fiction submissions?

SM:

TN: Are the pieces that you do accept mainly by solicitation or query?

SM:

TN: How often would you say that you publish unsolicited manuscripts?

SM:

TN: Does *Redbook* still offer its annual Fiction Award? If not, why was the award discontinued?

SM:

TN: Thank you very much for your time and attention.

DOROTHY HAMILL'S PRELOADED IPOD

Chicago's bel canto wind
supports her shoulders, whistles pitch—
the libretto of hair. One lutz two, three loops four.

She shuffles the ice's throat, even as she freezes off the recitative.

(All skaters scrape and labor against this. Something about those mid-range parts,
the witches, bitches, and britches: butterfly spins, a spiral sequence, hydroblading.)

Her wrists emphasize technique, a torso edged by the grinder's diamond wheel.

When she flattens her body to the accompagnato, she oils her legs in henbane

and flies without trousers. To demonstrate, she holds lit candles

to her feet, which sing without flicker or hollow.

PIGMENT

Color is pigment, primitive fruit
in approximately nine million permutations.

For centuries, philosophers made elegant attempts
to produce green. Shadow still gave rise to blue.

This, they correctly assumed, was not a result.
The nature of color is the sky we manufacture

—reduced by the brain to gold, a film
of wing, heat reflected into its components:

hemoglobin, melanin, carotene & chlorophyll.
The thin medium of air becomes visible

only when directed across a surface. Sensation
does not exist in a sweep of brush or landscape,

bristles behaving like short-wave gray that salmon
& lobsters obtain from the limitless range

available for commercial use. Color television
is based on this principle of additive mixture

which first appeared in 1928 to explain why
a pale mauve sunset captured its opposite.

WOMEN'S RUGBY, LAW 22: MAUL

It's maul-like-a-bear.

Not mall-like-shopping.

But you're yelling *strip me! strip me!*

That's kind of like a mall.

Damn, what malls you go to?

I need to go there.

Anyway, you hear me shouting

strip me strip me strip me

you come running.

Hot girl saying that?

I'll be fielding your shorts.

But seriously. Pink cleats?

You must be straight, honey.

DOROTHY HAMILL DEFENDS HER VIOXX STATEMENT IN COURT

1: Claim

I've told this story before:
 one woman, one paycheck,
 just one testimony. That's the truth.
 Doesn't matter who or what, except

one woman and one paycheck.
 Maybe it's me, maybe not. Really
 doesn't matter who or what—except
 making a statement. I support that.

Maybe it's me, maybe not. Really,
 the commercial, sir? Yes. I had to
 make my statement: *I support that*
product. People trust me because I'm

the commercial, sir. Yes, I had to
 move as I once did. My legs are
 products. People trust me because I'm
 famous. It's good news: now arthritics

move as I once did. My legs are
 walking advertisements; bodies, my
 fame. Oh, it's good news. Now arthritics,
 they bend, fall like children. They're

walking advertisements, bodies. My
 words are nothing. Forget that
 they bend and fall. Like children, their
 pain travels from bone to heart.

Words are nothing. No, forget that
 testimony. The truth is, just one
 pain travels from bone to heart
 because I've told the story before.

2: *Counterclaim*

I've told that story before:
 pain travels from bone to heart
 as one. Just testimony? The truth is,
 words are nothing. No, forget that

pains travel from bone to heart,
 bend, fall like children. There,
 words are nothing. Forget that
 walking advertisement. Bodies? My,

they bend and fall like children. They're
 famous. It's good news. Now arthritics
 —walking advertisements, bodies—
 move as I once did. My legs are

famous. It's good news: now arthritics
 produce. People trust me because I
 move as I once did. My legs are
 the commercial, sir. Yes, I have to

produce. People trust me because I
 make a statement; I support that
 commercial, sir. Yes, I have to.
 Maybe it's me, maybe not. Really

making a statement—I support that.
 Doesn't matter who or what. Except
 maybe it's me, maybe not. Really,
 I'm one woman. One paycheck

doesn't matter. Who or what I accept
 is just one truth. That's the testimony
 of a woman whose one paycheck
 has told this story before.

THE ANKYLOSAUR AFFIRMATION

I am master of Legos—molded palms,
fruit trees, low-lying green rounds.
The color of road cones, my embedded plates protect me
against Spongebob's atomic leg drop.
No See N' Say can imitate the rack of my club tail.

I have memories of fighter jets,
Montana flats, Barnum Brown's classification,
the chalkboard scrape of Deinonychus claws.
My wide skull, my acorn brain, my plateless underbelly.
A boy pokes my clumpy neck with a No. 2 pencil.

I hate the flash that roughs my parts.
Too much injection? Not enough pressure?—who cares
what forced me carnivore. I must chew those burrs,
imagine grass. I must teach myself to drive a fire engine.
I must teach myself to drive fire.

MAKE-BELIEVE*for G. W.*

The act: playground speculation. Do we need speculums, external genitals, sex? Would our necks flex backwards? The tail? Surely cloacal stimulation can count as *sex*. . .

But scientists don't know how we do it! They only just learned to verify dino gender from bones; erotic arts remain an unknown fossil—frottage as likely as immersion sex.

Posterior presentation is the dominant theory—nothing that hasn't been enacted in Barbie's Dream House. Still, pink elevators can't hold our bodies or the organs that mark our sex.

Exhibit A: our flattened crotches. They clack, never conjoin. No *Tab A* for *Slot B*, no groove; this is love we can never have: no *Dino Double-Down*, let alone *Tyrannosaurus Sex*.

We need role-play—stego skirts to peek beneath, archaeopteryx chaps, the big drag show—and kids to bang together our slick bottom halves. Their performance matters during sex.

And I, *Compsognathus*—of dainty jaw and triple digits—surrender to five-pronged hands. In them, balance comes easy. I hump like a bird. My flesh lingers, chaste. The plastic is sex.

EDITIO
for J. S.

I do books now — no, I make them. With angle clamps, sandpaper, presses, a power drill set to fire by alternating current, two converted drafting tables. My forge (cf. “Vulcan”) fits into a flatbed for border crossings. Work always finds me; notice how a scrap of dawn can file its incisors on three poets at once. Light never warns them, *Brace* [body/text] *when you saw through*, [and/or] *the words will erase themselves*. It sneaks. Line by line, a lone beam strings poets along (cf. “Venus”) — yes, that suicide blonde with greased D-cups beside the pool,

one who gripped her husband’s hand at the altar (cf. “I still imagine her pale nylons pooled around the ankles during our honeymoon”) before she took War as a lover. This isn’t a drill, miss, any more than it’s an *ars poetica*. I can’t talk about the correlation between viola strings & accentuals, nor am I at liberty to discuss Bakhtin. The slightest theory sends me into fits (cf. “Satanic panics”) of criticism. I know the ocean doesn’t care, so why record what I saw? The *will of wild birds* (cf. “Yeats”) gives way to *little stolen trees*. A typo changes all, dawns

a new era of interpretation. But I just make the stupid things. I sleep days, stay up until dawn working on other people’s projects. Never mine. I gave up the *ars* long ago, left behind pools of manuscripts where my father’s lightning should have been. Once I wove that net and saw my wife’s tongue racing inside her cheeks (cf. “my dearest, if only my mouth could drill through gold the way it does your body”), I knew to give her up. This old artisan’s face fits [her/me] better than “trophy husband.” Sometimes I miss my hammer’s weight, the strings

of action: iron, heat shaded orange-white, strike, etc. Another filament, another fist rings against the anvil. Lathe[r], ri[n]se, repeat. I’m well-suited to the work; I’m ugly. What dawn (cf. “Aurora”) desires to charge me with her representation? Who among you authors sees fit to saddle me with your estate? [None.] I’m riding against an abstraction. Miss, go play pool with someone else. These hands (cf. “Mr. Moretti”) aren’t good for much. I prefer to drill, not advertise. Don’t put me on your covers; mutation is not a design motif. If buyers saw

my face on poems, they’d stop writing. What work could I do then? I guess I’d take up saws next, become a carpenter. “Book,” “wood,” and “steel” are kissing cousins (cf. “linen strings are kin to glue, cross-bindings similar to dovetails”). There’s more intertextuality in this drill than the MLA. Relationships reveal themselves — the bride draws back her veil, dawn flashes teeth, the poet croons, *Let me show you my limited editions*. Enough links to spool a singularity’s weight in typewriters. My wife knows [nothing/everything] [, how] apples fit

into her palm like their curves were sculpted for her. And she holds me by the stem, as befits her character. I wish she’d forget about me. She has her man. I have my books. What I saw when I sprung my trap was the birth of a form — a thrashing stanza tempered in a pool of syllabic variations. One textual body leads [to] another, *et reversio*. Once the poet strings enough corpses together, I make [flower] arrangements, gather, anthologize. Yet each dawn I bind to paper is my wife’s shadow. I’m no poet. Poets don’t give up the goddess for a drill.

Brackets show just a few drops in a pool of deviations; pick your favorite. Odds are one fits best. I leave it to you to drill through every possibility. It’s hard to joke when what I saw hanging from my strings haunts me. But no worries, miss. Your heaven will be done by dawn.

DOROTHY HAMILL GIVES CAMMI GRANATO A PAIR OF SEA OPAL EARRINGS
with a line from William Cowper

I sing the sofa (and the French hook). I, who lately sang
arabesques and Ice Capades, now sing you. Do you wear

the earrings I sent—the radiated drops, silver crotchets
like commas in the lobes? I know you hate me—fierce

against my action figure, product endorsements, pageboy
hair. It's twelve degrees colder where I work, but you have

slick-knee *effacés* to rival mine. I've watched your shaded taps
of goalposts and crossbars pre-game, your digs in the flash-

frozen pond behind your family home. These gestures
are mine, too—six of one, half-dozen of the mother

who paid to teach us both how to skate backwards. Medals
can't fashion the silk knives in your shimmering ears. You did that

with your stick, played forward from Providence to Nagano,
Montreal to Salt Lake—sure in the knowledge that every woman

is architect of her own rink. Tonight, I recline on my couch,
bones croaking all thirty-plus years since that first gold. I hope

you realize I made you what you love. That nothing worth its cut
survives, and no one worth her seat takes the cushion.

IRIS ORCHESTRATES HER BODY

I say *moonbeam basal membrane*.
I say *spectral fire*.

No one thinks twice because

of a few wavelengths:

sodium, overlapping scales,
metal foil—*something*.

My bands narrow.

I produce clouds
black as the long moon glossing its way to New York.
Two arms

outstretched, deviating angles

——the space between,
Alexander's Band,

named for the Peeping-Tom Greek
who first observed it.

Yes, the dark of my back——
where energy is lost,
where supernumerary arcs form.

I am the Madagascar moth,

the bridge between messenger
and summation,

illusion of the curve I crave.

PAR AVION

[10.06.2008 – *L'Abbaye de Pontlevoy*, France]

The chapel is half cathedral; the monks ran out of money & slapped an entrance on what was complete. Today, a maintenance worker has dressed the altar in white. I linger at grayed saints' bones set in faceless wooden busts. Snails cross a wall older than home. My friends say it's a crime how common these places are.

Later I discover a vineyard behind a garage, buy a bottle of *rosé*, promise to return for the *confits de vin*. Each jar, a little window, captures this country whose language I barely know.

[13.06.2008 – *Festival Internationale des Jardins*, Chaumont-sur-Loire]

Jardin 28: Nordic Dreams

The last thing I noticed was the wild strawberry. Hard to see such small reds against bluegreen spruce, 3 white chairs, the rough-hewn log wall, faded Danish panorama. This sky can't exist under French sky, where all distinctions blur in a unified field of gray. Only red & white, chair & wood keep the color. A space so tight, I must see everything stapled to me — not stacked, attracted, collapsible.

[13.06.2008 – *Festival Internationale des Jardins*, Chaumont-sur-Loire]

Jardin 4: Le jardin poubelle

forget the can curtain
2 interlaced crates
blue-red-green pigmented *plastique* web
connecting wood to vinyl to ground —

someone had to cut

a hole
through 100 flat boxes
& throw the middle out
to make room for 1 seed

[13.06.2008 – *Festival Internationale des Jardins*, Chaumont-sur-Loire]

Jardin 22: Réflexions

3000 flexible mirrors
1000s meshed to weave
100s strung down
bendflex of light
on bodies mirrors water
this water in water

this rust bridge above
groans my weight
hides a frog
3000 more in air
3000 faces turn
warp to frog

so new in flight

[17.06.2008 – Home of Pamela Moulton, Pontlevey]

Quail Egg Evening Gown

somewhere you crack
little speckled eggs
for your morning omelet

who knew breakfast sparkled
in your windshield who knew
he killed a fly with your jeans

[17.06.2008 – Home of Pamela Moulton, Pontlevoy]

Language of Gloves – Flirtation Manual

you miss your body	& your boy
one the uncut linden tree	one the lightbulb
one a bloated hedgehog	one the olympic crescendo
one heat-warped lingerie	one peaches & black pepper
when both are naked it's hard to distinguish	

[20.06.2008 – Montrichard]

I write your mooncrater feet. Your mothsneeze walk. Toes of rattlesnake & metric ratchet. Knees of Lake Erie paperweights. Camel rustbelt thighs & your sand-filled bathing suit belly. Your hips of *Petit Éclair*, buttocks of training-bra tissue. A sex of ladyslip & cold Dr. Pepper. Cilia & Speedy Gonzales waist. Your chest of mahogany stock pots. Your neck of threaded needles, of angled dynamos. Your back of suicide kings. Your mouth of variegated yarns. Your papercut mouth. Three mouths, & eyes that eat almonds & sentries, that promise to sell the moon for pennies on the dollar, that open slowbright — a hand eclipsing three skies, like the pulling away of hotel sheets to reveal Ursa Major.

[22.06.2008 – Paris]

Pretend my new bracelet is 16 rubber-strung solstices, not glass. Pretend it is a series of elbows — yours, or perhaps those of the model who lit my morning cigarette. (She was not as bony as you.) Pretend that toddlers never piss in Metro corridors, that pollen shimmers & hearts litter the streets. I'm lost in a vendor's pocket.

[25.06.2008 – *Musée Rodin*, Paris]

In the beginning, I will be Eve; I will be cast in chalk. Rain will erase —— & it will always rain. Adam, being mud-born, won't mind, but he'll weave tents so we can fuck outdoors. Then I will create galoshes. Auguste captures my cringe against skin's clear wash. Adam lies about the invention of the umbrella. I wonder if the swell of my belly is a maker's or my own.

[26.06.2008 – Paris]

who else can I become

my right hand never changes

NOTES

“The History of Thick” is after Susan Stewart’s “The History of Quiver” and adapts language from the quotations accompanying *The Oxford English Dictionary*’s definitions of “thick.”

“Predictable Contemplations of the Body as Planet as Body” adapts language from the *Wikipedia* article “Planetary Habitability.”

“Multiple Choice” adapts language from the *Wikipedia* article “Prostate Cancer.”

マリコのジレンマ (*Mariko no jirenma*) is Japanese for “Mariko’s dilemma.”

“Sundog / Zodiac of a Fingernail” adapts language from the *Wikipedia* article “Antartica.”

“Little Key” is a modified erasure of the *Wikipedia* articles “Clavicle,” “Masturbation,” and “Watermelon.”

“Gloss: Two Interviews” culls material from a series of emails between the author and *Playboy*’s managing editor, Jaime Malanowski—as well as an unanswered email to *Redbook*’s editor-in-chief, Stacy Morrison. “Gloss” is not intended, and does not attempt, to reproduce the author and Mr. Malanowski’s complete correspondence. Most changes to the language are cosmetic, grammatical, and/or organizational in nature; omissions are for abridgment purposes only.

Both “Pigment” and “Iris Orchestrates her Body” are modified erasures of *Color*, edited by Helen Varney (Los Angeles: Knapp Press, 1980).

All of the “Dorothy Hamill” poems make use of inherited language, obstructions, restrictive forms, and/or Oulipean constraints; they are also in conversation with a poetic sequence by Erin Elizabeth Smith about hockey-queen Cammi Granato. Special thanks to Angela Ball, Eric Flynt, Rhonda Lott, Allison Riddles, Jordan Sanderson, Erin Elizabeth Smith, Lindsay Walker, Lynn Watson, and William Wright for their valuable suggestions and feedback.

“*Par Avion* [20.06.2008 – Montrichard]” is after André Breton’s “*L’union Libre*.”