

Limo casket

The stemless white rose
disappears from the aisle
between two rows of folding chairs
lined up before a black casket,
gleaming like a limo
and closed. I ask around
to see where the white rose went
but no one can hear me.
Two pink rose heads lie still on the ground,
stemless and intact.
I've driven up hilly streets to get here
where men stand on gray house balconies,
point cloth-covered rifles at me.
Now I've reached the town center
where chairs are arranged for a funeral
but whose?
Before I can open the casket lid,
my dream ends.
The riflemen never shoot, just point
their long guns at me, blanketed
like mummies.

A breast is bombed. He threads a worm through his palm.

1. Worm

Hands toss my left breast, a grenade
to march my scar to the front,
tattoo my torso
with a thread unraveling
as its flag.
Fingers flick ash in my milk cup,
carcinogens orange as post-chemo pee.
Gray skin gauzes my post-mastectomy heartbeat,
raising itself like elders' veins
or confused worms dying on driveway concrete.
If home is a body, then my skin is mud.
My scar's a worm exiled
in my no-good country.
My hubby's hands
are always hungry.

2. Thread

My scar's a loose thread
unraveling from patchwork
in a failed attempt at quilt class.
I am not my grandmother sewing patches together.
I don't know how to sew a soft breast
back onto this rock face, this granite wall
near the balloon of my right breast,
a bomb enemy hands launch in war.
If the body is home, then my torso's a wall
at the edge of a country.
My hubby's hands are refugees
trying to scale my border wall
but I've filled my trenches.
I put my skin-colored bra on backwards,
clasp metal hooks,
then turn it around so my prosthesis is a sandbag,
my rubber boob over my border wall
reinforced to block two bullets:
my hubby's searching hands.
Talk about trench warfare.
My hubby wants to jiggle the bomb in his hands,
two shell fragments meant to pierce my broken heart.
But jiggling my bomb can lead to explosions

like dynamite near a “keep out” fence.
17 years ago, a surgeon said
I’d have to lose 70 pounds
before he’d reconstruct my left breast
and in the trenches what he left
is a pink thread across my chest
unraveling in tug-of-war
between my hubby and me.
Doctor, conscientious objector,
you declared war
on my no-good country
when you refused my right to symmetry.

Novelty Lamp as Gun Shop Décor

6.

What if this leg lamp's a rocket
to shoot me from gun shop,
military megaplex
where parents and hubby
shop shotgun for Daddy?
What if I could carve
flesh from this calf,
slice fishnet with knife
until I find Apollo's door,
switchblade to sanity?

5.

In the calf are controls.
I could fly
like Buzz Lightyear to the North Pole,
rocket to Andromeda 2.5 M light years away,
no "We Support the Hoover Police"
in her galaxy –
no leather couches blood-colored,
no gun magazines carpet-strewn.
No Santa-haired Ralphie gawking,
eyeing me on a blood-colored couch.

4.

Can't tell if he's got a thin-lipped frown
or a cherry-red grin
'cause he's wearing a mask
and I can't see his mouth.
I can only see his eyes.
Shells launched to penetrate,
my self-esteem his bullseye.
Can't hide beneath leg lamp's skirt fringe,
body on display like a zoo's pink flamingo.
But my legs aren't a lamp's or a flamingo's.

3.

My gams aren't the great Vera-Ellen's
or a red-coated Rockette's.
My thighs wish they could ride
on the skirt tails of the leg lamp.
So muscular, so sculpted, so perfect
like legs of Bellatrix
who I hope will adopt me,
make Orion home for me
where Grable's, Garland's, and Crawford's calves
swim the blue between myriad stars.

2.

But away at the leg lamp's calf I won't carve,
won't sacrifice "fragile" flesh
with a gamma ray knife.
If that's the escape hatch
I don't want it.
Grounded on Earth,
I'm the only animal not gun-shop gawking
where the couch leather's blood-colored
beneath a wall sign that reads
"We Support the Hoover Police."

1.

Mommy charges a shotgun
to her credit card for Daddy.
Hubby's tongue
drools pools of green envy.
And I crouch
like a defeated dog on a couch,
wishing I could go sit in hot Nissan.
Virginia Woolf, my waiting companion.
A literary goddess and I
will take off for the Isle of Skye.

Under Six Heavy Sweaters

*“So when she could no longer play well
enough even to teach us,
she hired some of the men to haul out
and burn the piano
in the field behind the house.
--Claudia Emerson, “Piano Fire”*

Seventeen years I’ve shoved this mound
in my bra’s left pocket.
I lift the blob and cram it in,
stuff the beige and lace with more beige,
same color as foundation.

This prosthesis weighs five pounds, a mud-colored mound,
hideous shrine to cells that malign,
chew my nipple like Pac-Man gulps cherries.

This insert sits on my chest wall
like a bully on a nerd, suffocated in the cafeteria
sweating bullets from Satan’s circle.

If I laid this body on a blanket under the beach sun
like a Viking on a ship --
my prosthesis and bra buried in six heavy sweaters --
would this silicone shrink,
flat as sad balloons at Peter Brady’s party?

Would these tangled polymers unweave,
melt like ice cream,
blaze and flame like football bonfires?

I’d like to toss this temple mound
on a funeral pyre
or tie it to a tree and light two branches,
burn this rubber bitch
like she’s a Salem witch.

This blob of Beelzebub makes my scar itch.
This mud-colored disc metastasizes my memory.
I cram this blob in a bra, hide my runaway boobie,
gone like a kid on a milk carton from the eighties.

Burning down a matchless mine

High school boy told me
he could see up my skirt
as I sat in freshman English behind him,
the same plaid dress I wore to church,
dress I wore as Mom, Dad, sister, and me
rode up Red Mountain Expressway in the family car.
Where we ascended, men cut through the mountain
like a switchblade through pantyhose.
For Momommy and Papa's 50th anniversary,
we drove to Baby Doe's past Vulcan,
god of the forge,
smoke of past fires from iron ore
smoldering as Glenn Frey sings,
"You belong to the city, you belong to the night,
concrete under your feet,"
you belong to the street....
longing to be me
in a Sunday dress in freshman English,
math, history. Teased,
pushed from a freshman science lab chair,
told my body could be seen,
made to feel filthy in a dress touching my knees.
A woman crouches on her knees
on a concrete sidewalk, front page of the Birmingham News.
Fingers laced through a chain link fence like a prisoner,
chain link tattooing her palms like stigmata of Christ crucified.
And I'm dazzled by the magic city's shimmering lights
as I ascend the mountain before supping on beer cheese soup,
two years since my messiah was raped,
kidnapped from Baby Doe's.
This matchless mine closed in '94,
three years before I was raped, choked.
City lights shone for me, 1987, prom night.
I wore a pink dress like Molly Ringwald
to Baby Doe's for dinner,
not knowing ten years later
I'd be wearing an argyle skirt, not plaid,
and my Dad's navy blue knee-high socks
when it happened to me at five o'clock.

Facebook friend

Wade in water on the Grace and Truth altar.
Shove stubborn toes in cement brick. Sink heart,
flail arms like Pilate's hands panicking, liquid in bowl.
Hill cross splits at the place of the skull.
As my head goes under, Golgotha thunders.
My heart thunders red as I read your timeline.
"Why did she wait so long? Thirty years,
can't be true."
Sunday church, your face behind me, two pews.
I'd see your words, you knew.
Preacher chants "forgive, forgiving, forgiven"
as I curse you for Christine. "One beer!"
jokes choke me like my rapist's hands
round my neck as I pray for grace
in baptismal pool.

Salvatore Ferragamo: Salvo

Star volt of a fear era: these shoes in my fame game aren't teal. Neither are sirens that begged to roar when Dad threatened to sic the cops on me as I called him to say a Black woman would be my college roomie. The gore was far more when my white roomie was van-stabbed. The vast fog rots her killer's rat eyes. This city's iron ore mouth foams with gourmet restaurants parading salt-encrusted plates of farro. Uniforms ride on mares' backs, wield battering rams. Take a seat as I apply salve to your toe. These Ferragamos pinch my feet. Tale of the velvet black shoes my would-be roomie gave me. Her ears hear anger's hydrogen flare as your lips hiss like a red balloon that slips from child hands. Sing alto in the choir as I write this salvo. Stare at the vat full of ale. Say that ale is a sin. But not this, not this. This era of fear and battering rams. This star volt jolting non-teal sirens awake. The seal on the party tea breaks when tar's smeared on my almost-roomie's name. The party tea's seal is torn as I acquiesce to your threat. Seal torn in celebration, time for a tea party, 'cause I drank your Kool-Aid.

Paper doll cutout

Circle in pencil my paper breast.
Then, scissor me out,
you blue-gloved fist,
swashbuckler wielding scalpels in my grove
where there's one swollen, pitted globe.
Nothing rhymes with orange
so breast's got no one to dance with.
Left scar's a hieroglyph,
scalpel skin map.
X marks the cave where fruit once bloomed,
nippled apple
filled with milk and honey.
Gone nipple,
like the pink eraser chewed off a pencil.
Surgeons say "peau d'orange is this skin's condition,
breast cancer symptom
licking marble eyes with tangerine fire.
Pronounce "peau d'orange" as if it's a perfume,
essence of orange blossoms, notes of pink rose buds
gone rotten.
When I say my breast is the rind of an orange,
what I mean is
I'd like to rise from this gurney,
ignite your silver mastectomy scissors
like torches fisted by angry villagers
because you've made me a monster.
But I know I won't.
I know I'll fold myself back in,
lie flat on this gurney
like the paper doll I must be
till my biceps harvest oranges,
pop lines blue as loose-leaf.