

WE WHO HAVE NEVER BLED

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Masters Program in Creative Writing

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PREVIEW

Dedication

I dedicate this work to the memory of my father, Stephen Fisher, and my grandmother, Iva Horton. Neither of whom ever read a word of my writing, but who both supported every choice in my life nonetheless.

PREVIEW

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by

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	v
Table of Contents.....	vii
Preface.....	1
Works Cited.....	26
Bibliography.....	28
WE WHO HAVE NEVER BLED	
One.....	34
The Last Thing She Said	35
Showering With My Mother.....	36
Her Stolen Voice.....	37
Body and Bones	38
For Elizabeth Spires.....	43
Lear’s Daughters.....	44
After the Blade, Isaac.....	45
Anatomic Findings On My Father’s Death.....	46
Apnea.....	47
Gun Control	48
Golem.....	49
Two.....	50
Wendy Darling and Juliet.....	51
Two For Flinching	52
Mephistopheles Be Damned	53
Autumn Changes Everything.....	54
Lichtenberg Scars	55
Moving Out of Our Old Apartment	56
Meeting Dr. George Tiller	57
Ophelia in Water.....	58
Breaking.....	59
Lotus Eater.....	60
Permafrost.....	61
Our Daughter’s Name.....	62
My Husband’s Lover	63
Lady Macbeth, Forgetting Her Lines.....	64
Tattoo	65

Three	66
Legend	67
Sleeping Venus, or An Elegy for Carina Saunders.....	68
Skin Trade.....	70
Hackberry Children.....	71
Interviews in Six Voices	72
Parking on I-44	73
Running.....	74
Screaming	75
West Virginia Woman Arrested After Biting Off Pitbull's Testicles.....	76
Meteora	77
Myths of Creation	78
Four.....	79
Consequences of Explosions	80
Photograph at White Sands National Monument, 1998	83
Wildfire.....	84
At An Abandoned Factory in Shamrock, Oklahoma.....	85
Picher-Cardin, Tar Creek Superfund Site	86
Council Oak	87
Ghosts of Centrailia	88
Methylphenethylamine	89
Conversation Downtown, 2003	90
Roads Home.....	91
Vita	92

Critical Preface

In her pivotal essay "Laugh of the Medusa," Helene Cixous identifies womankind as, "We the precocious, we the repressed of culture, our lovely mouths gagged with pollen, our wind knocked out of us, we the labyrinths, the ladders, the trampled spaces, the bevvies – we are black and we are beautiful. We're stormy, and that which is ours breaks loose from us without our fearing any debilitation" (349). Cixous is arguing for a specifically feminine aesthetic in writing, but this passage has always seemed to me to be more universal. In other words, rather than identifying simply the plight of the feminine writer, Cixous is commenting on the status of womankind as a universal whole. She is labyrinthian and complicated, exists in the bevvies and trampled spaces with her mouth gagged and her body broken. In this, there is an awareness of death, an awareness of breaking and of being actively taken apart by society and by nature – and yet, in her embracing of these things there is also a beautiful storm, and in the most dangerous moments there is both an awareness of transformation and a lack of fear and debilitation. This idea of transformation is what strikes me and reminds me that in the pivotal "Theory and Play of the Duende" Lorca writes that the "arrival of the *duende* presupposes a radical change to all the old kinds of form, brings totally unknown and fresh sensations, with the qualities of a newly created rose, miraculous" (7). I believe that what Cixous hints at in "Laugh of the Medusa", finally, is an understanding of the concept of *duende* that is wholly feminine, and in forming this thesis project I became consciously aware of continuing the construction of this feminine *duende* in my own work.

When I began this project, all I knew was that I wanted to write about the women in my family: my mother and grandmother and my sisters, their bodies, and the ways that they had been broken and made stronger. Early in the process of choosing poems and writing new work I

knew that if I was going to be including and writing work on those stories, I could not ignore poems about my own body and experiences. I also knew that I couldn't tell any of these stories without also looking at the things which break women, and the things which rebuild them. Finally, I knew that I couldn't share these poems about my mother without also including the poems that focus on the death of my father, and our shared experience in losing him. Once I realized that I couldn't fully tell the narrative of these moments – of my family and our loss and the social constructs that surround these things – it became clear to me that I wasn't only telling my story in a confessional way. I was, instead, concerned with the idea of those experiences that break women and the transformative power of recognizing and moving through them.

This, of course, is not a new path. In 1979's "Infection in the Sentence: The Woman Writer and the Anxiety of Authorship" Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar write "surrounded as she is by images of disease, traditions of disease, and invitations both to disease and to dis-ease, it is no wonder that the woman writer has held many mirrors up to the discomforts of her own nature" (29). Lorca writes "The *duende* works on the dancer's body like wind on sand. It changes a girl, by magic power, into a lunar paralytic, or covers the cheeks of a broken old man, begging for alms in the wine-shops, with adolescent blushes: gives a woman's hair the odour of a midnight sea-port: and at every instant works the arms with gestures that are the mothers of the dances of all the ages" (12). I believe that it is through the transformative power of *duende* that the mirror on the discomforts of womanhood and femininity that Gilbert and Gubar puts into the hands of women writers comes to have real meaning

I believe I'm exploring this feminine *duende* aesthetic in two general areas. First, thematically, through poems focused on an awareness of death and of pain, on the female body breaking, and also through poems of transcendence and poems of witness which I believe are

integral to a feminine aesthetic. Also, I believe that this work also explores the idea of *duende* in form. First, with varied poetic forms such as prose poetry and hybrid poetry alongside more traditional poems which stretch the idea of line and white space, tension and momentum. Finally, with a focus on non-chronological storytelling which I believe allows space for *duende* within the poems themselves, and within the work as a whole.

The first and most important basis of this aesthetic is an intense focus on the female body – one which in many cases ties the literal and physical examination of the body to larger concepts: a larger social context, or a revelation on the nature of the feminine. One of the most nuanced examples of this can be found in Elizabeth Spires' poem "The Bodies", which details the bodies of women of different generations who come together in a sauna with the speaker of the poem. I reference this work in my own poem "For Elizabeth Spires" but in a larger sense I used "The Bodies" as a guide for many of my own poems. In Spires, the women of the sauna are “naked, disproportionate, lush, / hung and burdened with flesh” (3-4). They are real, everyday women with whom the reader can identify; average, ordinary, and completely natural. Here, early in the poem, is where the idea of the flawed society that changes these women is first eluded to. The women are portrayed as “orchids blooming” (5), but something in their environment has caused them to “open slowly/...blooming out of season” (4-5). That environmental force is described later, as the women question how they will be able to come together through “doors [...] chains [...] linkages” (14), all mechanisms of modern society used to keep people apart. As they ask “How shall we be joined? / How shall we know each other?” (13-14) the reader can see that the nature of these women is affronted by the knowledge that their society seeks to keep them separated. But here, in the sauna, they can come together as a “rank and file” (17) army, “row upon row” (17) of women who know the expectations of their society,

but who can come together briefly to escape them. They can “give up their pose” (11), and simply enjoy the purity of being women. There is a pity for men inherent here because men are “searching/ without knowing what it is they search for” (24-25). It is implied that the women have found what they were searching for among the other women; it is the men, who have no avenues for this type of closeness with each other, who never shall.

In *Spires*, the women in the sauna serve as symbols of a greater idea. Among them we see the natural progression of time as it affects a woman’s body, mentality, and life. Each step in this passing of time that is “moving without pause” (18) is represented in the bodies of the women gathered there. The younger women are “androgynous” (20), in the sense that a man’s presence in their lives is not necessary for their satisfaction. They exhibit characteristically male traits, such as the strength of will to accomplish goals on their own. In this sense they are “complete unto themselves” (20). However, androgynous here should not be assumed to signify that these young women are hermaphroditic. They are described as “willows” (19), which implies that they are probably tall, thin, and wispy: a description of conventional female beauty. The next distinct group of women introduced, the mothers, have gone beyond this headstrong phase of youth. Though they still adore these “little moons” (22) that circle them, they do not necessarily long for their own youth again. Instead, they are portrayed as a symbol of stability. Just as a planet’s gravitational pull prevents its moons from spinning violently into space, so do the “great bodies of the mothers” (21) keep the “young girls” (19) anchored and safe from their tendencies to spin away violently into life. They no longer exhibit the willowy nature of the young, however. Their “great bodies” (21) are large, firm, and “lush” (3): making them a stable and comforting presence. The last group, the “mothers of the mothers” (23) is the final, and presumably the most advanced, stage of womanhood. These grandmothers are “old” and “wise”

(24), showing that they have worth in society despite the fact that they are “ponderous and slow” (24). In this world that is so “cold, still, and expectant” (32), these women are the keepers of wisdom. They are the leaders in this “rank and file” (17) army that the speaker sees assembled. Here again the speaker connects the women with natural things. Presumably, it is the natural order of a society for the elders of the society to be the wise ones, for the youth to be tempestuous and headstrong, and for those in-between to be the mediators between the two.

In the environment of the sauna the speaker feels connected to the other women and thus, feels more connected to herself saying: “Sweat beads my forehead. / Heat rings my breasts, like circlets,/and I *am* my body, all shimmering flesh” (6-8). Her “secrets are whispered” and her “stories told” (9) along with those of the rest of the women. Here she feels a sense of solidarity and a closeness that the world around her does not allow, and her tone is relaxed and meditative. However, when the speaker leaves this environment and walks “into the great body of the world” (31) all of this changes. Suddenly alone again, after the comforting closeness she has just experienced, she is “taken by the dark” (33) and begins to wonder about her significance in her world. Here her tone becomes more immediate, sharper, more pleading. Spire’s choice to change the tone of the poem so dramatically here emphasizes the effect that leaving the safe haven of the sauna has on the speaker. Before, in safety and comfort, there had been no need for immediacy, and this connection between the bodies of the women and the lessons learned by connecting to the “great body of the world” is an example of the transformative moment and awareness of *duende*. Not in a way that is sudden and consuming, but in a more subdued way that seems organic and feminine.

Many of my poems throughout this collection attempt to make this same connection. In “Two for Flinching” the focus on the body in pain is used to highlight a moment of sexual

awakening, as the speaker comes to realize her sexual attraction to another girl in the context of "bruises blooming" on her "skin, ripe, like Anna Marcos" (9-10), and the transgressive and transformative desire is "like fireworks/sparking under my hands, sudden nameless need" as the other girl hits her, "so hard that it flashes/electric in my spine" (14-17). In "Showering With My Mother" the literal moment of the poem is involved with intimate attention to my mother's body after an embarrassing incident of urinated on herself in public: "shivering in/her own sweat cooling the heat building across her chest" (6-7), "breasts sagging, nipples/and feet aching" (10-11), "the urine hanging acrid to her skin" (15). The poem, though, is hopeful, highlighting the connection between the speaker and the mother both in spite of and because of the "battle/waging under her skin" (4-5). In each of these examples, the pain and breaking of the body is the catalyst in the poem for realization and transformation.

A major theme that I seem to gravitate toward when exploring this idea of pain and the body is betrayal showcased in various ways: Betrayal by society in the case of war or socialized injustices, betrayal in relationships where I tend to focus on adultery and the consequences of such and also on coming of age and the various awkward betrayals inherent in it, and finally in the betrayal of the body and mind in the sense of self-harm, the infirmities of age, and death. I find that one of the best ways I can portray this in poetry is through the use of literary or artistic allusion and mythological and religious imagery. I'm most interested in places where these iconic stories fall apart, where they can be juxtaposed with a sense of brokenness and loss. To begin section three I use a subtitle from Cixous' pivotal essay "Laugh of the Medusa" in which she links a woman's power, though for Cixous this is a diffuse sexual power, to a woman's language. She writes, "She lets the other language speak – the language of 1000 tongues which knows neither enclosure nor death" (351). I chose this quotation for section three because this idea of

this almost mystical, mythic language speaks to the mythological lens that appears as a trope in many of my poems.

Mythological references, particularly, I think are most powerful when used to explore the connections that can be made from the inherent violence in many of these stories to larger moments of loss and transformation. The poems in which I make mythological allusions draw from my own mixed ethnic and religious background. In "Myths of Creation", for example, I try to examine a horrific moment in my own mother's life – a moment where her first husband held a gun to her in front of my older siblings – through this mythological lens. The poem begins,

While the children watch wide-eyed, her husband shoves
the gun barrel into my mother's mouth, finger on the trigger,
For years she becomes a new Cipactli – rough thick skin,
one hundred wide mouths of sharp white teeth gaping,
always hungry. She is created in this moment [...]. (1-5)

Drawing from my mother's heritage, this poem of my mother's story becomes entwined with the mythological stories of Cipactli, Coatlique, and Xochitl. This alignment is indicative of the situation presented by theorist Julia Kristeva in "Women's Time" where she aligns the feminine, and motherhood specifically, with the depictions of women as both "creatures" and "creatresses" in literature. She writes that "this identification also bears witness to a woman's desire to lift the weight of what is sacrificial in the social contract from their shoulders, to nourish our societies with a more flexible and free discourse, one able to name what has thus far never been an object of circulation in the community: the enigmas of the body, the dreams, secret joys, shames, hatreds of the second sex" (874). To this list, I would add another item: the victories. In "Myths of Creation", through the innate violence of these particular Aztec myths, each with their own examinations of rape and domestic violence, I believe that the final lines "her smile

stretches sharp white teeth, lips tight/around the flared head of his gun" (35) becomes a much stronger image of my mother's rejecting that same violence from her own husband.

In Beth Newman's "The Situation of the Looker-On: Gender, Narration, and Gaze in *Wuthering Heights*" (1990), Newman address analysis of theorists like Jacques Lacan, Sigmund Freud, and Laura Mulvey to ask the question, "Is the gaze male?" (453). Newman is examining the act of gazing as it gives power to female characters, and the ways in which that is contested and problematized. Freud's understanding of the Medusa myth, for example, connects the feminine gaze to a sense of horror that she provokes amongst men, while Lacan connects the returned female gaze to castration anxiety. In both cases, this idea of the female gaze, of the woman's unique position to view and comment on the world by returning the patriarchal gaze in spite of her lack of access to masculine power, seems to be a unique tool for women discussing society. I would argue that this same returned gaze allows for poetry of witness that is integral to a uniquely feminine idea of *duende*. Like a Venn Diagram, Lorca writes of the bull fight "The bull has its own orbit: the toreador his, and between orbit and orbit lies the point of danger, where the vertex of terrible play exists" (12). When the feminine voice is put in place of the onlooker, the gaze returned against the poem's subject, it allows for this space of witness, violence, and transformation in the spaces where the orbit of the subject and the witness converge.

Poems like Robyn Rowland's "Unspoken Stone in a Stubborn Sea – Epic of Inishbofin" embrace this idea of witness. In the poem, the speaker imagines herself addressing adventurers who are risking dangerous sea waters in the Irish town of Bofin throughout history. She writes,

You could be lucky – go back to the house for a sweater
like John Moran, boat leaving without you, or survive one storm
to die in another, or simply be following those fish with their slinky tails
flashing rainbows across the white spume above the breakers

when the storm strikes in '27,
killing forty-five from the island and coast,
ending driftnet fishing in the rowboats of Bofin.

You might be two young students in '76 from the prairies of Kansas
where the sky was their sea – boundless blue, deep with air, tideless.
Adventure a slick of shining in their eyes,
They knew nothing of salty rips. Climbing The Stags –
antlers of rock reaching toward heaven – limbs taut in the
unconquerable strength of youth, they watched the tide cut them off.
A huge thing the sea, growing bigger, wider, churning up panic. (120 - 134)

By placing the speaker in this position to watch these events, to comment on them and to them, but by not giving the speaker any agency to actually change them – in other words, by placing the speaker of the poem in a position as witness and spectator, but not as a participant – Rowland is able to comment and criticize on the social constructs of Ireland throughout the poem. Later, she writes, "And they took the boats. And the right of an Irish man to own one.//Today the harbor catches the traveler looking for safe tide." (53) The examination in the poem isn't just historical or biographical. The poem ends with an intimate connection to a new adventurer.

Your father loved the sea so much he travelled to the coast
when he heard the whisper of death, grew you up with salt in your veins,
languages in your mouth and islands in your bones.
You are not from here. You grew into it, stone by stone, plant by plant.
You are knotted with through marriage, through your longing,
and your soul sings here, knowing as many do
that home is not always the place your birth gives you. (154 - 160)

Because the unique position of the speaker outside of the action of the poem allows her the ability to connect the plight of the Bofin adventurers to much larger underlying social issues and, through the pain inherent in that connection, to a sense of eventual realization and affirmation.

Still, there is, at least to me, something cold and impersonal about Rowland's lack of a first-person "I" speaking through her poem. In other poets where I see these techniques, I find that it is possible to have both the first-person commentary and the sense of the returned poetic

gaze of the witness. In Breda Ryan's "To Paul, A Refutation" it comes in the narration, inside the poem, of someone who is identified by another, more authorial speaker, only as "the wife."

When I have buried my husband, said the wife,
and wept to the moon,
I'll take the brush with the dented back
and unravel the knots in my hair,
splash my face and hands with water,
walk out in high heels.

Wearing careful gray cashmere and high collar,
I'll stead my nerve with red wine
and wait among the instruments of torture,
evidence of what women make me do.
I'll write what was dictated:
Is it better to marry? (31 - 43)

Here, by having the poem be told through the subject's narrative, and not through the speaker, it is possible for Ryan to make a connection to the larger social construct of religious expectations that are acting in the poem. The final rhetorical question "Is it better to marry?" becomes indicative both of the subject's tension, a reference to 1 Corinthians 7.9 which is quoted in the poem's epigraph, and of the nature of the speaker herself in her role as someone who cannot answer questions, cannot act on the subject. It is only the subject herself who can both decide and write that "it is better to burn" (44) to end the poem.

One of my favorite examples of this thematic movement in my own poetry is in the prose poem "Running", though. The poem was born from a story I was told when I began teaching at an inner city school. My classroom had been the site of an attack on a former teacher who was stabbed by a student. Fellow teachers pursued the student and caught her as she fled the scene. Later, it was discovered that the teacher had been sexually abusing the student. In "Running" the speaker places herself in the role of the pursuing teachers, and the focus throughout the poem is on the juxtaposition of the attacking student's body – "I crush the fragile shell of her skin into the

dew wet grass, feel her heart pounding a frantic, shrill rhythm through her spine as I kneel over her" (7-8) – and the violent scene that had been left at the classroom – "his blood spread through her fingers, stained her white thighs where she'd left him lying in a burgundy pool of it outside his own classroom door" (3-4). The speaker, though, is helpless either to end the tragedy or to protect the girl. Like Ryan, I use the technique of rhetorical questioning to show this at the end of the poem: "my hands land heavy and her heart pounds an unfulfilled beat against my panting chest, the same way it must have pounded against his -- don't you think I would have done something? Don't you think?" (14-17). I use the same technique in the poem that I believe is one of the pivotal poems for this collection, "Sleeping Venus, or An Elegy for Carina Saunders" in which the final line includes "What can we say, we who have never bled?" which is, of course, the line I chose to use as a title for this book because I believe as a whole the idea of not bleeding, of standing as witness, is just as integral to my aesthetic as the stories of those who have bled.

"Sleeping Venus, or an Elegy for Carina Saunders", grew out of a project for a course on *antropoesia* with Tim Hernandez where I took as my subject for the course the human trafficking of young girls in my home state of Oklahoma. The first drafts of this poem were very vague, trying to encompass large views of the problem. It wasn't until giving the poem a very specific focal point – the still unsolved slaying of human trafficking victim Carina Saunders in 2011 – that I was able to really conceptualize the poem in a way that gave it power. Here, too, I believe that applying a lens of allusion gives the poem a stronger figurative level. In "Sleeping Venus," I look at the subject through a comparison to the famous painting by Titian Giorgione in 1510.

When Giorgione paints her she is a revolution, one arm
raised in rebellion, the other with fingers against the brush
strokes, her blushed and hidden sex. I study her mounted
in my office between interviews, before Amber tells me

everyone knew what was happening to me. The room is littered with articles and lists, bullet pointed statistics that track the I-40 corridor and the numbers of missing bodies, women found in dumpsters. Venus, she is in a duffel bag tossed behind a Homeland Grocery, nineteen years old. Two men, they say, Obey, or end up dead. I am flayed open across headlines before I open the door [...]. (1 – 11)

Though the first-person speaker of this poem investigates the stories of Amber and Carina and the other women throughout the poem who are victims of human trafficking, she cannot act. She is left only as a witness, to ask 'What can we say?' I believe this role as witness is integral to the feminine experience. Through it, it is possible to investigate the response to a society which acts upon *all* women both directly and indirectly, which has the potential to break them and also the tools with which they take ownership of agency and rebuild themselves.

I believe that naturally this type of poetry of witness lends itself to becoming poetry of confession, which is also a form that is indicative of the feminine. The second section of this book is subtitled with a quotation from Luce Inigaray's famous *Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un* (1977): "In her statements – at least when she dares to speak out – woman retouches herself constantly" (364). Inigaray is speaking of a constant reimagining of the "she" of her essay, and the poems in this section explore a similar type of duality in the more intimate, speaker focused poems which seek to complicate the first person speaker. I would argue that the subjects of the poems in this section, which range from romantic relationships, to abortions, to suicide attempts, to attempting to have a child, establish a new juxtaposition between desire and fulfillment, between the role of the speaker and her ability to fulfill that role.

One poet in whose work I see this trope is Rita Dove. In "A Suite for Augustus" she writes

But to me, stretched out under percale,
The cherry blinks sadly: Goodbye, goodbye,

Spinning into space. In this black place
I touch the doorknobs of my knees, begging to open.
Me, an erector set, spilled and unpuzzled.

Dove draws a visceral connection here between desire, the knees that want to open, and futility.

In the mixed form poem "Pamela" she writes of the speaker, "She feels old, older/than those friendly shadows/who, like the squirrels, don't come too near./Knee deep in muscadine, she watches them coming,/snapping the brush. They are/smiling, rifles crossed on their chests." The idea of desire and futility is further complicated here by Dove's description of the speaker who feels old, too old to enjoy the friendly shadows, too old to see anything but destruction in the things she once enjoyed. Inigaray would be troubled by this sense of distance from desire. She argues that the space for female ownership of desire comes from "nearness so pronounced that it makes all discrimination of identity, and thus all forms of property, impossible" and that women derive desire from "what is so near that she cannot have it, nor have herself" (367). However, again it is in the space between Dove's distance and Inigaray's nearness that I believe allows for *duende*. Harkening back to Lorca's example of the bullfight - that is the space where *duende* lives, between the bull and the toreador, or between a woman and desire.

I explore this theme in the poems in the second section of my collection in various ways. The section begins with "Wendy Darling and Juliet", a prose poem that discusses childish fantasies and their realities, and that is discussed more directly in "Two for Flinching". Romantic disassociation is discussed in "Moving Out of Our Old Apartment" and "Breaking" as well as in "Our Daughter's Name" and "My Husband's Lover." These poems are definitely confessional in nature. The confessional poets sought to compose the drama of their personal lives, their cultural heritage and dislocated contemporary society by putting emphasis on the historical and personal past, the presentation of intimate or `taboo` material, and on strategies for transforming private

experience into public act. Like the discussion of *duende*, they tend to be about the history of violence and of the misery, and sometimes joy, of psychological and cultural collapse.

In "Lady Lazarus" Sylvia Plath utilizes these aspects of confessional poetry to bring to her readers a deeper understanding of death and of the human experience as a whole. Her speaker recognizes the misery of her situation, as well as its irony. In passages such as "I do it so it feels like hell./I do it so it feels real./I guess you could say I have a call. (48-50) and in the speaker's comment "Do not think I underestimate your great concern" (72) addressed to doctors whom she has already closely associated with Nazis, Plath examines the bitterness of her situation with sarcasm and irony. The psychological collapse of the speaker serves to heighten the reader's awareness of this bitter situation. The paranoia present in lines 65-79, in which the speaker is berating the doctors who have resurrected her, as well as the progression of the speaker's suicide attempts as they become more and more violent, serve to exemplify this. Throughout this examination of the psychological effects of personal experiences, Plath also strongly connects the poem to historical moral assumptions by the extended use of the Lazarus metaphor. As I'll discuss later, this use of mythological metaphor also speaks to my work, but the connections it draws in this poem are clear and precise. Just as the Biblical Lazarus is raised from the dead at the command of Christ, so is Plath's speaker brought forth from the dead by the will of "Herr Doktor" (65). Thus the lines are blurred between life and death, good and evil, cause and effect.

This is the same dichotomy I play with in poems like "Two for Flinching," where I connect the experience of my first kiss to a violent game where one child punches another child repeatedly.

[...]Bruises bloom on my
skin, ripe, like Anna Marcos, her best friend, three years from

me, the most popular girl in the ninth grade, she falls into playing like an accident, a question mark always on her tongue. I am thirteen, and small, and bruised already from fists I do not want to hold against me, but suddenly I want to touch, like fireworks sparking under my hands [...]. (9 – 15)

Or in poems like "Meeting Dr. George Tiller" in which I write about my own abortion, performed by a doctor who would famously be shot down by anti-abortion activists a few years later. In many poems I also draw on my theater background to explore duality and desire. Imagery both of the theater and allusions to plays and the technical aspects of performance recur in my work often. "Ophelia in Water", for example, references the drowning suicide of Ophelia and relates it to my own aborted suicide attempt. In the same way, the idea of acting and performing and the inherent duality of the actor as a person versus the character he portrays is a theme that also reoccurs. In "Lady Macbeth, Forgetting Her Lines" I draw that connection, as the poem follows an actress portraying Lady Macbeth as she forgets the lines in the famous monologue in which Lady Macbeth calls upon the spirits to unsex her, to make her more masculine. The poem reads, "Mascara and sweat trace a slow roll down /the dun of her cheeks. *Come, you spirits that/tend on mortal thoughts.* She has played this part" (14 – 16). Hopefully drawing the connection between the actress' inability to remember those famous lines, and the futility of stripping away what is feminine. I believe that there is a duality of the speaker in these poems – the woman who both desires to fulfill traditional roles, and the transgressive woman who pushes past them. In this duality, however, I believe there is also the moment in which the speaker transcends – in which she throws open the curtains, or is overtaken by the dance; the moment where in the realization of loss or need the speaker either becomes more than she had been, or is overtaken by the dark.