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Un-becoming: A Confluence of the Poetic Voice and the Sociological Imagination

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UN-BECOMING: A CONFLUENCE OF THE POETIC VOICE AND THE
SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Writing

Stephanie Stanley Walls

Farquhar College of Arts and Sciences, Division of Humanities

Nova Southeastern University

May 2015

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Introduction

Southern society is a bastion of patriarchy supported by the pillars of family, gender, power, and tradition. This enduring structure facilitates the automatic labeling of unacceptable conduct. The veil of southern etiquette dictates that social missteps, such as challenging the tenets of patriotism or questioning biblical authority, remain unspoken, dealt with instead by sleight of hand, whispers, turned backs, and knowing glances. In the public eye, many folks succumb to the rigidity of tradition while covertly acting out their frustrations in the privacy of their homes. Secrecy underpins the mythology of southern culture where smiles, handshakes, and “How do you do’s” embellish manicured lawns lined with white picket fences. This politeness attempts to negate the clandestine abuse lurking behind plantation shutters and six-panel doors. In a culture fueled by social capital¹ rather than a *money economy*,² image is everything, and corrections to unbecoming behaviors typically remain unseen. Contemporary sociologist Erving Goffman posits that social interactions are performances. Individuals step into various roles as they progress through their days.³ This theory becomes evident upon examination of the social constructs that perpetuate white privilege and patriarchy in the South. My goal is to illustrate some of the transgressions that slink around in the shadows of southern culture, and to talk about the invisible injuries that occur in secret—all for the sake of keeping up appearances in public and maintaining the power structures regulated by family ties, gender performativity, and adherence to tradition.

¹ In sociology, *social capital* is the expected collective or economic benefits derived from the preferential treatment and cooperation between individuals and groups.

² Merriam Webster’s online dictionary defines *money economy* as a system or stage of *economic* life in which *money* replaces barter in the exchange of goods.

³ Goffman, Erving. *The Preservation of Self in Everyday Life*. (New York: Anchor Books, 1959) 33.

Family

Merriam-Webster defines the word “family” as *a group of individuals living under one roof and usually under one head*. In southern culture, significant emphasis is ascribed to heredity, commonly known as “kin.” American writer Richard Bach states, “The bond that links your true family is not one of blood, but of respect and joy in each other’s life. Rarely do members of one family grow up under the same roof.”⁴ The family is supposed to be a haven from the stresses and demands of everyday life, but many researchers have discovered a high incidence of abuse within family units. In fact, some sociologists describe the family as “...more violent than any other single American institution or setting (with the exception of the military and then only in times of war).”⁵ Social researcher Roger Levesque, J.D. Ph.D., states that “violence among families remains hidden due to the widespread beliefs that adorn, protect, and idealize the family across cultures.”⁶

Consider, for instance, the happy family on Sunday morning, all dressed up and traipsing into church, Bibles in hand, hair perfectly combed and curled for all the congregation to see and admire. It would appear that this is the normal way of functioning for the family, yet many parents admit that prior to leaving the confines of the home, struggles, tantrums, and reprimands obstruct the path to suitable public

⁴ Bach, Richard. *Illusions: The Adventures of a Reluctant Messiah*. (New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, Inc., 1977) 65.

⁵ Strauss, Murray A., Richard J. Geller and Suzanne K. Steinmetz. *Behind Closed Doors: Violence in the American Family*. (Garden City, New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1980) 4.

⁶ Levesque, Roger, J. R. *Culture and Family Violence : Fostering Change Through Human Rights Law*. (Washington D. C.: American Psychological Association. 2001) n. pag.

presentation. Once outside the front door, the mandates of society pervade the psyche and silently regulate behavior.

Michel Foucault describes this behavior regulation as capillary control: control that stretches into the most private aspects of a person's life.⁷ Children may resist this invisible power structure in society until they mature and begin to witness that those who do not adhere to social mores and folkways experience restricted access to resources and opportunities. Females, in particular, who do not uphold the family image sometimes face shaming and scapegoating due to the perpetuation of the fictive "virtuous woman" in Proverbs 31:10⁸ and the prevailing ideal of the *Southern belle* as counterpart to the *Southern gentleman*—a necessary combination for the preservation of male privilege.⁹

⁷ Foucault, Michel. *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*. Ed. Colin Gorgon. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980) 30.

⁸ See Bible Gateway. 2015. "Description of a Worthy Woman." Proverbs 31. 10-31. *NASB*. Web.

¹⁰ An excellent wife who can find?
She is far more precious than jewels.

¹¹ The heart of her husband trusts in her,
and he will have no lack of gain.

⁹ The Encyclopedia of Gender and Society defines male privilege as a special status conferred on males in societies where male supremacy is the central social organizing feature. For an in-depth discussion of the term, see Phillips, Debby and John R. Phillips.

What About Daddy?

It's funny how mama got busy

When Daddy got cancer.

Mama was always at home.

Now Daddy's mostly alone,

Sitting on the couch with his cap

Covering the mangy patches of hair.

His eyes look outward and inward at the same time,

And when I ask him what he's doing,

He says, *I'm just waiting on Mama.*

Daddy had to use a wheelchair

When he couldn't walk anymore.

Mama was out shopping with her friends that day,

When I found him lying on the floor like a pile of old books.

His eyes were looking up and down at the same time,

And when I asked if he was okay,

He said, *I'm just waiting on Mama.*

Daddy was in bed all the time when

I went to visit him one night.

He hadn't eaten, and

His eyes were looking left and right,

So I fed him dinner,

And he savored every bite.

[What About Daddy, page 2, continue stanza]

When I asked, *Where's Mama?*

He didn't answer.

Daddy couldn't speak anymore,

So I read to him;

Something about love from *The Bible*.

I think he liked it

Because he cried a little,

And his eyes were dancing around and around.

His body shuddered and shivered.

Then Daddy closed his eyes for the last time.

The memorial service was a few days later,

And the church was so full

We could hardly swallow.

Mama looked like a movie star,

Driving up in her fur coat and new car.

And we all said "There's Mama.

She came to say goodbye."

After the burial,

At Mama's house,

We stared at fresh paint,

And scooped up casseroles

[What About Daddy, page 3, continue stanza]

That tasted like the smell of new carpet.

The front porch creaked

As we shuffled through a thicket

Of friends and kin in their Sunday best,

Standing like pillars, sipping coffee,

Sitting in fold out chairs,

Balancing plates on knees,

Stabbing at pies, whispering

Into each other's shoulders about

How Mama must've won the lottery

When we lost Daddy.

Mother's Advice

I was thirteen

When the red brown spot

On the bright white crotch

Of my cotton panties glared up at me

Like a Rorschach inkblot—but not.

More like a nightmare,

A hallucination?

Skull-and-crossbones,

Initiation to womanhood.

I shoved a wad of tissue

Between my thighs,

Ambled through the house,

Riding an invisible hobby horse.

Mother was shopping,

And when she returned

From spending the money

That Daddy earned,

I asked her to follow me

Back to the toilet,

Stared at the tile, and

Told her I got “it.”

[Mother's advice, page 2, begin new stanza]

Standing in the doorway,
Hands on her hips,
Tapping her foot, she offered a tip:
“Look for a package under the sink
Of sanitary napkins wrapped in pink.
Don't forget to be discreet
And wrap them like a present.
No one wants to look at those
Or smell something unpleasant.”
She marched away and yodeled back
From halfway down the hall,
“Good luck, my dear. Try not to fret;
It happens to us all.”

I was forty-three
When the night sweats plagued me
Like being in a wet t-shirt contest
Except with extra gravity.
Menopause? I wondered,
Thrashing out of the covers.
No need to call mother,
I thought as I crawled

[Mother's Advice, page 3, continue stanza]

Back into bed at 3:00 am

With a rolled-up towel

Nestled between my breasts.

Better to wait until Wednesday,

And bring it up to the therapist.

Learning to Shift

It's time.

This car has seen better days

Like the day you tossed me the keys,

Sending me into the world

Bolstered by warranties,

Power, freedom, and security

At the threshold of adulthood,

I knew that I would succeed.

With this car,

You were going to teach me

How to parallel park and fix a flat.

You ordered a AAA map that

Showed me the way to college and back.

But when I left home, you left too.

The brain tumor robbed me

Of a dad to come home to.

This car became a monument

That I worshipped, clung to

For just one more year,

One more trip,

A chance to commune

To sit and forget,

[Learning to Shift, page 2, continue stanza]

To imagine that I still had a place

To land.

Years of repairs, deteriorations

Have left me with a body

Dented and scuffed

Tires balding, hinges moaning,

And an engine that has endured

Enough—

The way you should have aged by now—

Growing older, slowing down...

Like each new model year,

In my mind, *you* continue to shine,

While I feel the depreciation

Between your age and mine.

So now it's time to stop repairing,

Start preparing for a future,

Scrape the curling decals

From the window and the bumper,

And accept

That you're not

Coming back.

It's time.

Gaslighting

“I’ve always been there for you, and I always will be,”

Announced mother as she swizzled her vodka & tonic.

“Don’t you agree?” She surveyed the empty kitchen.

Of course, mother, I thought as I blurted out, “No.”

“Is this about your cancer?—It was bad timing—

I had just been elected president of the Women’s Club.”

“But I needed you.” I said, cracking open my chest,

Determined to make her see.

“I’m sorry that you remember it that way,”

Said mother as she reached for the melon baller

And proceeded to scoop spheres out of my heart

While it shivered in my hands like baby lamb.

“It’s tender. I hardly have to chew.” She noted,

Popping the burgundy balls into her mouth like butter mints.

“It still hurts mom. Even though my heart isn’t

In my chest, I still feel the cut, the dig.”

“Don’t be silly,” she replied. “How could something

So exhilarating to me ever cause you pain?

You really need to work

On your perspective, dear.”

Love at the Laundromat

That day when the dryer broke,
My agenda collapsed like a failed business merger
As I lugged four loads of laundry to the Wash-N-Fold,
Armed with a roll of quarters in each front pocket;
A mission quickly aborted
By rows of completely-occupied machinery.
Whirring and whooshing enveloped me like a warm robe
As I lurked in the corner like a kid waiting up for Santa.
Mothers traipsed through the rumbling landscape,
Daughters at their sides, following along
As if connected by an invisible tether,
Talking, teaching, laughing, learning,
Sculpting mounds of fabric into stately bundles
Through sleight of hands and elbows.
I hovered near the vending machine, watching—
As they pantomimed in some foreign dialect
That transformed daily routine into happy communion.
Finally, I deduced that I must be witnessing *Love*
Amidst garments tumbling and dryer sheets fluttering—
Almost like the lace edges of my mother's handkerchiefs
Dancing over my head
As she shoed me away during afternoon tea.

The Day When I Grew Up

was not the day when I taught myself

How to ride my bike in the rain,

Or the day I lost my virginity in a sleeping bag

In my boyfriend's basement.

It wasn't the day that I found out I was pregnant

In my second semester of college

Or the day I got married for the first or third time.

The day when I grew up,

I sat on my mother's couch,

Three glasses into a bottle of Chardonnay,

On the trailing edge of middle age,

And a few decades down memory lane.

"Mom, do you remember the time..."

My brain clicked, and the list of her transgressions

Filled the back of my throat as I glanced her way,

Startled by the old woman peering up at me

Like a kid anticipating a bedtime story,

Balancing a wine glass on fingers that resembled

The branches of a January oak;

The same fingers that used to squeeze my little arm in public,

Nails digging in, leaving red crescent-moons

Along the landscape of my tender flesh.

[The Day When I Grew Up, page 2, begin new stanza]

“Mom, do you remember when...”

Words raged inside my head:

Histories—My stories— that I wanted to retell,

Shaming and scapegoating that needed to be set straight:

You were a colicky baby—

Mom, I’m lactose intolerant.

You were too clingy as a child—

There were so many men. I needed you, Mom,

But I guess you needed them.

Your teenage years were horrible—

Yes they were, Mom. Horrible.

Flashbacks filled my mouth like broken glass

Begging to be spewed.

“There were times, mom...” I began.

She smiled at me, her eyes dancing

Like a child eating cotton candy at the circus,

And my life flashed across the creases on her face.

My eyes zeroed in on her heart like a laser.

I knew in that instant that I could crush her

With my soliloquy of retribution.

“There were times, Mom, when you

And I didn’t get along,” I said, leaning in

[The Day When I Grew Up, page 3, continue stanza]

As she crumpled onto the arm rest, wide-eyed,

Bracing, raising the goblet to her heart like a shield.

I closed my eyes and thought to myself,

I'm bigger than her. It's my turn now.

But when I glared at my mother,

I no longer saw her.

Her face was replaced by my granny, my daughters,

Pleading with me to please forgive her,

And the rancor that coated my tongue turned to water.

“Mom?” I asked. “Do you remember how

We argued so much when I was younger?”

I broke the pause before she could answer,

“I think you should know...

That to me

It was all just a big misunderstanding.”

Gender

When we think of the South, we think of Southern charm, hospitality, and the mythological time warp that slows the flow of life down to the dribble of honey on a biscuit. As with any society, public interactions are a veneer over private lives, and in the South this can be especially problematic for women. For example, a woman rises to become cook and mother to her family, then steps into the role of her day job to supplement her husband's income. Later, she arrives home again to cook and supervise homework, drive her children to various activities, and then tuck them into bed, once again returning to her wife role as she slips into bed with her husband. The cycle repeats itself leaving the woman exhausted as she strives to keep up with the requirements of society alongside her peers. In the 1980s, this condition was described by Arlie Hochschild as "the second shift." Her research into the lives of working women revealed an unequal distribution of household labor between males and females.¹⁰ More recently, feminist researchers have theorized that a "third shift" further encumbers women as they provide emotional support to family members in addition to their jobs and domestic duties.¹¹

The South perpetuates a particular kind of hegemony in which male privilege weaves itself into every stitch of society. The social elite admittedly enjoy participating in scripted gender roles while women in the working and middle classes face the challenges of misogyny on a daily basis. Further, a woman who is divorced or unmarried risks being labeled as "damaged goods" by the church, the family, or even friends and acquaintances.

¹⁰ For an in-depth discussion of "division of household labor," see Hochschild, Arlie R, and Anne Machung. *The Second Shift*. (New York: Penguin Books, 2003)

¹¹ Gerstel, Naomi R. "The Third Shift: Gender, Employment, and Care Work Outside the Home." *Qualitative Sociology* 23.4 (2000) : 467-483. Web. 12 February 2015.

Unfortunately, many women perceive that they have few options for leaving an abusive situation due to the inordinate value placed on marriage and motherhood in southern culture.

Men face gender discrimination in the South as well. For example, those who do not subscribe to the authorized masculinity of the “Good Ole Boy Network” face bullying and persecution. This elusive brotherhood poses a considerable threat to people who are openly homosexual, forcing some to seek refuge through an unspoken mechanism called a “lavender marriage,”¹² a haven reserved for members of high society. Other queer and non-traditional individuals carry out their lives in the shadows of heteronormativity.¹³ In 1903, sociologist W.E.B. Dubois coined the term “double-consciousness” to describe “...a peculiar sensation...this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.”¹⁴ Though Dubois’s theories originally referred to racial prejudices, many contemporary sociologists have applied them to the experiences of other oppressed groups in society.

¹² *Lavender marriage* is a common term used to describe a male-female marriage performed with the explicit purpose of hiding one or both of the partners’ homosexuality.

¹³ Merriam Webster’s online dictionary defines *heteronormativity* as the attitude that heterosexuality is the only normal and natural expression of sexuality.

¹⁴ Dubois, W.E.B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. (Cutchogue, New York: Buccaneer Books, Inc. 1976) 16-17.

Bell Curve Ball

Yes,
actually
I am aware
that your child
is an honor student.
How could I miss the
redundancy of stickers
plastered so prominently
on the rear end of your SUV
like the fanned out plumes of an
amorous peacock strutting above
a row of family-member-stick-figure
decals as you swerve in and out of the
cul de sac, kids launching out of flung
open doors, water bottles cascading
onto the ground, crunching under
tires as you catapult out of your
driveway nearly decapitating
my dog while you wave and
smile at me on your way
to “yoga,” when we all
know it’s really
Therapy
Day?

Easement

A handshake evolves

Into a friends' embrace.

A kiss on the cheek

Leaves an unseen mark:

Indelible, pulsing,

Like a fresh tattoo,

Awakening dormant desires

Between spouses of others.

Reality fractures

With each neighborly hug

And the accidental brush of skin

Between a hand, an arm

The back of her neck.

Erotic thoughts creep

Into her mind's To-Do List:

Soccer game, necktie...

Little League, belt buckle...

Carpool, buttons, one by one.

Yearnings metastasize

During each public function

Eye contact lingers

Then quickly averts

[Easement page 2, continue stanza]

Skin quakes

Beneath his pressed shirt and her sensible blouse.

Bodies secretly beg

For the possibility to reclaim

The mystery of abandon

That marriages had snuffed out so long ago.

A chance encounter

Sparks the proposition.

Opportunity masquerades as coincidence,

Breathing life...into sin.

Chemistry conquers convention.

Cravings collide—

The scent of sweat, half-closed eyes—

Carnality, aching, blazing inside,

Torching the remnants of legal bondage—

Fading ink on stale paper

In the back of the bottom desk drawer.

Two neighbors become savages,

Bound by plots and schemes,

As honor slips into the shadows of sensuality.

Civilized adults devolve

Into ravenous brutes,

[Easement, page 3, continue stanza]

Enraptured by the mirage

That vows to quench

Yet dehydrates the soul,

Trapped

Between domesticity and decadence—

Belonging to neither—

Lost in a landscape

Of counterfeit intimacy,

Fooled by the fantasy

Of fidelity's detour—

An illicit itinerary

That leads to love's

Dead

End.

The Late Show

The clanging of ice on glass tolls through the kitchen.

Footsteps brush the floor as she slogs

Toward the decrepit couch cushion.

Crinkling cellophane and creaking cardboard

Reveal her companions:

Twenty slender suitors dressed in white,

Each waiting to give her a five-minute sacrificial kiss

And a distraction from the barren telephone.

With a gale-wind sigh,

She reaches for the lighter and the remote.

Darkness saturates dusk,

As flickering images pummel her blunt eyes.

Lips that once dripped with lovers' passions

Now pucker around the smoldering dry vices,

Filling her chest with

Soot that won't soothe

The cavernous ache.

Muffled babbling wafts from the television,

Attempting to arrest

Her sideways glances

Toward the mute machine,

Until midnight

[The Late Show, page 2 continue stanza]

Leaves her

With a sip of stale scotch-water from a tepid glass,

And a pregnant ashtray to escort her

Across the dull linoleum,

Through the kitchen,

Along the balding carpet,

To her crisp, fresh,

Empty

Bed.

Behind the Veil

I knock on the door to his apartment.

Tap. Wait two seconds. Tap tap.

As the door closes behind, I collapse into him

Pressing my forehead against his,

Gazing into his eyes.

I mumble through a banquet of kisses,

“You are my charger, and my battery is low,”

“Then let’s power you up,” he teases.

I break from his embrace, bantering back,

“I’ll race you to cloud nine.”

I throw my clothes onto the carpet,

Admiring him as he emerges from his own attire.

He tumbles onto me, and before I know it,

I am engulfed by his frame,

Moving in tandem like a trapeze act.

“Cloud nine going up,”

He whispers into the back of my ear.

And we do go up, and up and up

Until our bodies amalgamate,

Soaring and crashing

Into the pillowy firmament beneath us.

He pulls the comforter over our nakedness,

[Behind the Veil, page 2, continue stanza]

Nuzzles the nape of my neck.

“What will we do after today?”

He gazes toward the ceiling,

Tracing a circle on my chest with his finger.

“I can still see you after the wedding,”

I assure him.

“No, my love, it will be difficult.”

“What do you mean?” I protest,

“I can’t be married without you.”

My stomach tightens.

“We’ll see, my love. We will see,” he soothes.

I lie with him until the last possible moment,

Until time betrays us once again.

“It’s late. I have to go.”

I extract myself from our embrace.

“Don’t move,” I say as I dress myself,

“I want to think of you just like this.”

I race to my car and speed toward the church.

Pulling into the parking lot, I confront a coalition

Of tuxedos huddling near the side entrance.

“Hey. There you are,” bellows my older brother,

[Behind the Veil, page 3, continue stanza]

“Get inside. Let’s do this thing.”

He nudges me in the ribs,

Ushers me down the hallway

And into the dressing room.

“Yeah. Of course,” I reply.

And I shed my clothes—again—

Like I’m peeling off skin.

“You okay?” asks my brother, winking at me,

Waving a tiny gold band on the end of his pinky.

“Yeah.” I play tug-of-war with my cummerbund. “Nerves.”

Dong, dong, dong sounds the choir bell.

“Showtime,” says my brother.

He straightens my necktie.

Resilience

When you tear a young limb off a tree,
It won't crack.
You can twist it and bend it
Back and forth, back and forth
Until it frays and splays like an accordion
But the shredded fibers won't surrender
Like a heart that doesn't know how to stop beating
Inside the charred chest of a boy
As he lay on the crisp white sheets of a hospital bed
Littered with flakes of smoky, scorched, skin,
Lips quivering, singed eyes begging amidst a potpourri of
Gasoline, flesh and antiseptic,
Wishing he could explain to his mother
About how they wouldn't stop taunting—
The sweaty, jock-itch-ridden lot of them—
Like they were playing air hockey and he was the puck,
Whacking him back and forth with their words,
Day after day, year after year,
Seventh grade, eighth grade, ninth grade,
Ripping his outfits, stomping his loafers,
Bumping, shoving...

How could he tell Mama

[Resilience, page 2, continue stanza]

About the twisting, searing knot in his gut
Or that he felt like a hunkered-down soldier
Waiting to be ambushed?
Day after day...
Until he watched his violin splinter beneath their cleats,
And he cracked. He broke.
He hurtled home to the red gasoline can
That promised to end the maul.

Petroleum mingled with tears and sweat,
Soaking his clothes to a heart-beat rhythm:
Over, Done, This is Freedom.
The match hissed its final decree.
Flames torpedoed him into the front yard,
Too-late screaming, "I don't want to die."
Blackness shrouded him—
He awakened to the glow of his mother's face,
Her hand caressing the pillow beside his scalded head,
Cradling him with only her voice:
A melody drifting into his kindled ears,
"Softly and tenderly Jesus is calling..."
"There's not much time," said the nurse,
Administering another dose of morphine.

[Resilience, page 3, continue stanza]

The scent of latex accosted his nostrils,
Tubes clacked against stainless steel poles,
Words flailed inside his skull,
Searching for an exit,
Clawing their way toward his skinless lips
Emitting a long groan that meant to utter
I'm sorry mama.
I just couldn't bend anymore.
And looking into her eyes,
He knew, she knew.

Power

The South is notorious for its lack of access to higher education. In fact, the rural south contains a disproportionate number of uneducated women.¹⁵ This disparity further sustains the social structure of white male privilege and preserves power inequalities that leave many without an audible voice or vehicle for change. Ironically, white women face obstacles to educational resources, leaving them handicapped and reliant on men's access to social capital. A woman who seeks her own career clashes against fiercely-protected gender definitions and power structures of society. From the time that they are little girls, white women are trained that personal success is tied to "marrying well" and raising a family. Considering the more-than-fifty-percent failure rate of marriages, this advice is misguided, exploitive, and disenfranchising. Careers for the southern bride must come second (or third) or not at all. This hegemonic mirage renders the majority of women vulnerable to power structures that allow men to practice serial monogamy; a cultural pitfall that has bolstered the feminization of poverty, leaving single mothers and their children to form the highest percentage of people living below the poverty line in our country.¹⁶

The South is steeped in a "culture of ownership" where private property is highly valued and passionately protected. A ubiquitous "no trespassing" mentality lauds the acquisition of material possessions, and those who are owners assert great power over their domain. Unfortunately, there are occasions where property ownership can translate

¹⁵ Myers, J. E. and Gill, C. S. "Poor, Rural and Female: Under-Studied, Under-Counseled, More At-Risk." *Journal of Mental Health Counseling*. 26.3 (2004) : 225-242. *ProQuest Psychology Journals* 225-242. Web. 12 January 2015.

¹⁶ Mykyta, Laryssa and Renwick, Trudi J. "Changes in Poverty Measurement: An Examination of the Research SPM and Its Effects by Gender." U.S. Census Bureau. January 2013. Web. 12 February 2015.

into the perspective that even one's relationships are possessions, such as one's spouse or children. While privacy seems to be a natural and innocuous desire, it can also harbor secrets, infidelities, and injustices. The hills, backwoods, and double-wides, as well as the split-level ranches and McMansions, are covert settings for atrocities, abuse, and neglect. For those who own land or other material possessions, challenges to their privacy from the outside sometimes provoke a defensive response as evidenced by the ongoing debate over the right to bear arms.

The Equalizer

How about...

Instead of taking away

The guns, we

Give everybody a gun—

Level the field.

Everyone gets a rod,

So that when citizens—

Perched in their pick-em-up-trucks

Like cavalry commandos—

Start launching hate grenades,

They can exhibit their fervor

With bona fide honor

Against friends and lovers of various colors.

Because anyone can shout,

And grunt

At the masses—

Laborers, workers,

Lower classes—

“Let them eat cake...”

And quiche and chicken slime,

Breaded, fried, and supersized.

[The Equalizer, page 2, begin new stanza]

Anyone can hang
A rebel flag from a tailgate,
Shake a fist behind
Tinted windows and ejaculate
Disdain from lips
That snarl and spit
Through picket-fenced teeth
That gnash and grit.

Anyone can speak freely,
Armed with the artillery
Of wealth, status,
And the power of the majority.
But it takes a real man
To stand his ground and articulate
Opinions to someone
With the power to retaliate.

So be a Real Man
And speak straight
Into the cold
Steel eye
Of My
.357 magnum.

Pornography

When we got married,
You brought home a pet.
It was a baby elephant.
At first it was cute,
Sitting there on the comforter,
But it grew so large
That it filled the perimeter
Of our bedroom.

I started to eat it
One bite at a time
It looked like chocolate
But tasted like poo.
When it stood on my chest,
I grabbed barbeque
Sauce and nibbled
On its toes.

The more I consumed,
The more it would grow
Until all I could see was
Wrinkly gray leather.
We couldn't even sleep together.
I was crushed

[Pornography, page 2, continue stanza]

Against one wall;

You were shoved into another.

“I don’t like this,” I said

To which you replied,

“Stop complaining. You knew.

I had this elephant when I married you.”

I countered, “But now,

You’re so far away.”

Still, you yelled back,

“The elephant stays.”

I threw some clothes in a duffle,

And scaled the pachyderm’s torso.

Reaching the ceiling, I shouted “I’m leaving

You and the elephant in our bedroom.”

I slid down its trunk to the window,

And lifted up the pane.

I hurdled the sill,

Thinking, *Oh what a thrill.*

I’m off to reclaim my libido.

Out of the Fog

The morning sun accosts my battered face;
No comfort for the ache of love's dysfunction.
These throbbing wounds that *sorry* won't erase
Proclaim last night's spontaneous combustion.
Although my heart implores me otherwise,
Contusions echo reason through my brain.
Recalling how my flesh was tenderized
By knuckles fueled with loathing and disdain.
If I should stay, you'll try to make amends,
But history shows your promises don't last.
My newfound strength forbids me to pretend
The future will not replicate the past.

The time has come to follow my own bliss,
Propelled by pain away from this abyss.

Straitjacket

I'd rather ride bareback on a unicorn,
Or stomp around where devils fear to tread
Than live by an agenda.

I want to measure my life with sand
Between my toes on a Wednesday at dusk
Or the number of floors traveled up
And down in a glass elevator just because.

I'd rather wake up bare just in time for work,
Steeped in desire and a breakfast of kisses
Than politely sip coffee from patterned china
While discussing, neckties, tuition, and the business
Of retirement funds or a new kitchen.

I'd rather live my life by the phases of the moon,
Between magic carpet rides, and cinder-block shoes.
I may take a sponge bath in my own tears
Or slurp whisky from the bellybutton of a lover,
And if that makes me crazy,
Then I hope never to recover.

Tradition

The South is a land of smiles shrouded by whispers; it is a land where stories and mysteries sneak through the oaks and the azaleas, wind around the corner drug stores and lamp posts on Main to the front porch swings, back screened doors, and breakfast nooks. Some stories are told in broad daylight if you know the code of the wave, the wink, or the raised brow. The intense and reflective nature of poetry grounds the abstract emotions and experiences of women who were raised in the South amid restrictive language and limited resources that discourage independent thinking and persist in marketing a resistance to progress as Southern charm.

Traditions and rituals create and sustain the history of a culture; for some this is nostalgic, for others violent. The history of the South has been profoundly one-dimensional, focusing on the viewpoint of white males and eschewing the rich intellectual resources of women and other marginalized groups. It is high time to share the whole story of Southern culture, to unearth the treasure of small stories and meek voices. Flannery O'Connor once said, "...anything that comes out of the South is going to be called grotesque by the northern reader, unless it is grotesque, in which case it is going to be called realistic."¹⁷ It's time to be real, and to listen. This is how the South will rise.

Poetry becomes that conversation we could not otherwise have.

~Cid Corman (1924-2004)¹⁸

¹⁷ O'Connor, Flannery. "Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction." (1960) : n. pag. Web. 12 February 2015. <<http://www.en.utexas.edu/amlit/amlitprivate/scans/grotesque.html>>

¹⁸ *Poetry Foundation*. Web. 12 February 2015. <<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/cid-corman>>

Abstinence

She's a good girl who follows the rules

"No condoms," say the schools,

The church, and the parents.

"No sex allowed until marriage;

Abstinence is the only solution."

But no one tells her what to do when

The boyfriend says, "If you love me,

Let me.—just this once.

I'll pull out. Trust me."

In the back seat or the bedroom

After school before mom gets home.

It's a beautiful secret, a love for the ages

Like Angelina and Brad, Beyoncé and Jay Z,

Or a love song by the Dixie Chicks

Until she's late by a couple of weeks.

Now he's off to college

And she's out of the closet—

A heterosexual single white female—

Exposed more each day as her belly swells,

Left to march in the shame parade

With other good girls who obeyed

And trusted authority

[Abstinence, page 2, continue stanza]

Instead of taking agency

Over their bodies and futures.

Now they stand in line for vouchers—

Milk, eggs, and baby formula—

Casualties of the political dogma

That labels women as nice or naughty

By relentless regulation of the female body.

Pro-Choices

I remember how you asked my parents

If you could marry me.

It was the proper protocol—sort of

—when we told them that we needed to talk

And plodded into the living room.

We sat on the love seat opposite them.

Arms-crossed-all-around, we told them I was pregnant

And that we wanted to get married.

Father's neck began pulsing and,

Mother silently swallowed her face.

My father asked you three times:

Why do you want to marry my daughter?

—Because she's pregnant

Why do *you* want to marry my daughter?

—Because she's pregnant

Why do you want to marry *my daughter*?

—Silence...Um, because I love her?

And told myself I'd marry you

But only for a year or two.

Still

I'm so sorry is what they say,

And the words pinch away at my flesh;

For I am the one who must comfort them

In their state of awkward, shocked sympathy.

I want to be alone, to cry, and shout at God.

I want to fold into my husband's chest

And sob until my eyes are swollen shut;

But they are here, and I must be strong.

Friends glance across my dining room table

At unopened gifts,

But they don't ask,

And I will not give them back

Because this is my pain,

My hole, my gouged-out womb,

And I will keep these gifts

In return for consoling them in my time of need.

Maybe I will construct an altar,

Or make a burnt offering

With these gifts,

But I will not give them back.

For I now reside in a place

[Still, page 2, continue stanza]

Of unwelcome prestige,

A place whose inhabitants

Soberly sip the delicate moments of life.

For I have seen the beginning and end of time

Flash across my husband's eyes

When he gasped, *She's beautiful*,

As the doctor shoved him away.

Now I sit among the murmurs

Of well-meaning others.

Their consolations prick me

While I smile

And strain

To hear the first cry

That eternity abducted

On the stillbirth-day

Of my perfect baby girl.

Newton's First Law of Marriage

"An object at rest will remain at rest unless acted on by an unbalanced force. An object in motion continues in motion with the same speed and in the same direction unless acted upon by an unbalanced force."

It's like doing a facelift on a cadaver

After the affair—

After the discovery, rather.

How do we restore hearts shattered

By the wrecking ball of adultery?

Do we condemn and rebuild,

Or can our life be re-grouted?

Can we toe-step around the cracks for eternity?

Will the roof ever stop dripping

Like a *chemo IV*

Into cancer that defies remission?

We've endured the impalement,

Of the discovery, the admission,

But the torment lies in

The extinction of passion

Supplanted with manners,

Exaggerated kindness,

Chocolates, roses, and paper airplane kisses,

Pointed, parched, barely glancing the lips.

[Newton's First Law of Marriage, page 2, begin new stanza]

The worst part is not even the confession
But the profuse apologies
That sustain the progression
Of a make-believe reconciliation
Between the Betrayed and the Unforgiven
As we trudge through mine fields of obligation,
Camouflaged with tile, Berber, and granite
For the sake of our FICOs, the mortgage, the kids.

It's like doing CPR on a corpse
After the affair—
For as long as we can stand it—
For as long as we live.

7th Anniversary

You stopped loving me today,
Wincing away as I undressed,
But I think I'm going to stay.

Saccharine kisses on display
Hide what our friends would never guess:

You stopped loving me today.

Politeness coats all that you say.
Reluctant hugs are commonplace;
Still, I think I'm going to stay.

As I watch our children play,
I'm numb to all the subtle ways
You stopped loving me today.

The more wholeheartedly I pray
For the strength to live in grace,
The more I wonder how to stay.

Before my hair begins to gray,
There is a truth I must embrace:
You stopped loving me today,
And I know I cannot stay.

Postlude

I've longed to reach a place where I can breathe,

And feel my body melt into your form.

I've dreamt that one day you and I may cleave

To graft a union that will not be torn.

Unlike the days when we were only kids,

And parents exercised authority.

Their efforts to control all that we did

Were futile in deterring destiny.

For now we stand together face to face,

With hearts that override what years have done.

Let's claim what time and distance can't erase:

The secret of true love's phenomenon.

Transcend with me, and let our halved hearts mend.

I'll breathe the breath of you until my end.

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