

## Chelsea Bayouth

### Back Seat Driver

They are called Montgomery glands,  
the bumps that line the outside  
crest of a woman's nipple. Which

after giving birth release a homing hormone,  
a perfume map that only a newborn  
can read so that she knows

exactly where to place her mouth.  
Like a car driven for years,  
with a compartment found

free of dust or dog hairs, what a marvel  
to live in a body whose tricks  
& secrets have existed all along.

Pretend we are the captains.  
Move the legs, turn the wheel,  
while something else governs—

Set the glands to clock and breathe.  
To digest supper, organize its fats  
so that incrementally our hair may grow

and eggs may ripen by moonlight.  
We speculate, with the job of passengers,  
admiring the hills as we go.

Do we take into account  
the geometry of the succulent?  
The oxygen of leaves?

Never minding a foot on the pedal,  
or bump  
on the nipple of a woman ?

## Tethering

He is holding me so tight  
    my hands turn white,  
        the clammy under bellies of fish  
They are digging around in his guts again  
    To find the source of the leak in his J-tube  
        to find why he spills bile when he moves or walks or laughs

Torture is what I'm thinking when his face,  
    so drawn now from my rosy girlhood,  
        looks up through me in grincing pain,  
and claws at my arms like some dark hole  
    gaped at this feet, yawning around his existence,  
        a candle growing small in an airless cave

The doctors can't figure it out  
    They remove and replace the tube,  
        bile dribbling down his side and he arches  
His pupils constrict to pin heads  
    I am watching my father leave his body  
        Look at me I say  
Remember when you painted  
    the swing seat with mountains on it?  
        And our jeans wore it down?  
            Remember last week, when I got married?

But they hunt and they tug  
    Remove a length of tube from his intestines  
        and guide it blindly back in, the doctor unsure  
if it's going into Dad's bowel  
    or the outer space of his body

My hands are white fish  
    Look at my eyes  
        Don't watch what they're doing

You made me  
Isn't it a miracle?

## Hard Summer

It's only been five years since—  
not a *fight* fight. The first disagreement.  
The first time a shadow passed over us  
like a seagull on the shore—  
what must this large darkness be?  
He thought it was the end for us,  
he tells me years later.  
& his perfect head is framed in candle light,  
the glass of this place, everyone's glasses shining  
in the dark clink & mumble. His osprey eyes  
golden & Autumn colored with pupils so wide  
& dark I can see our children swimming there.  
His nose that is straight as the arrow in blue ink on my wrist.  
That I paid for one month after that summer, another fight—  
I had been crying while I walked down the street  
& passed a tattoo shop whose bone rattling stereo  
mirrored my mood. It was the first time I heard about Saturn  
& what it does to us as we chip away toward thirty.  
That tattoo shop is a dress store now & our first spat  
an anecdote. An inch worm  
compared to the fire of learning as growth.  
Of instruction vs. destruction. That summer, a sweaty,  
fertile bed. Questionable haircuts, walks to Food For Less  
for chocolate that melted before we got home.  
Bike rides through the city traffic under chemical sunsets.  
& dubstep cut by the ceiling fan, always on.  
No plants lived, while coffee stains accumulated  
on the front seats of my Volvo.  
Last night after we came, I fell off the bed & knocked  
the fiddle leaf fig on my way down. Coming to  
he asked, why is the plant moving? & what started  
as giggles, how far we have come, turned into hysterics.  
A motor in my gut that churned tears from sighing smiles.  
I made my way up to him naked & tingling  
flopped on his chest, my home of homes, & my  
wild laughter turned briefly into two sobs.  
*I know,*  
    *I know,*  
        he said.

## Older Brother's Room

I was allowed to sit on the bed just this once  
and lay my eyes on everything in this forbidden place.  
To cross the line of lava in the doorway  
where the siren of his voice would alarm if one foot  
trespassed. To look at his candles that I longed to touch,  
and the black light posters whose velvet skin  
I once dragged my grubby child finger across.  
When he reveals the portrait he's been drawing of me  
for the last thirty minutes, I'm so fat you can see  
the items of food floating in my belly because  
when you get as fat as me, he says, your skin  
turns clear. Along with the floating cheeseburgers and  
chicken wings, a luxurious braid of hair, like a  
horse's tail cascades in ballpoint from my underarm.  
I had imagined our father lighting up in his way,  
hanging the drawing on the fridge, ruffling our hair.  
For when he was proud of my brother  
it made me proud too.  
Brother who put a fly in the microwave, pressed  
a nine-volt to his braces, convinced me lightbulbs  
tickle to touch. Who once sprinkled my Ovaltine with  
rainbow marshmallows and cut my PB&J into a heart.  
I don't cry over the drawing, whose thirty  
minutes of focused attention are as sweet as cereal pink milk.  
I make my own off-limits room. Where dad's spankings,  
being sick at school, peeing in the sandbox, and this drawing  
all live. There's a sign on the door. I am not allowed in.

## Our Neighbor Knows The Devil

I noticed something was off with Robert when  
I said hello while walking back from my car.  
Barefoot on the sidewalk in the moonlight  
pressing his back into the ivy, he didn't reply.  
Then he began having animated conversations  
with Obama in his driveway. The devil

was after him. It was so commonplace by December  
we were in the habit of telling company  
not to worry when they heard him screaming.  
*That's just our neighbor, he's lost his mind,*  
but the cops never came when we called  
and when they did, said there was nothing they could do

*he wasn't a danger to himself or anyone else.*  
After the electricity was shut off  
he stopped closing his front door.  
It sat open, a dark hole which seemed to tilt sideways,  
a gaping mouth. He would appear and disappear  
through the doorway for weeks, sometimes rocking

in the frame. Every time he stood in his driveway  
shouting at the sky, sometimes swatting the air  
with his free hand, he held his pants up with the other.  
He'd become so thin but somewhere within him  
where Obama was his friend and the Devil  
was keeping his daughter hostage,

he knew that to let his pants drop would be indecent.  
The nearby citrus tree bare, orange peels  
scattered across his driveway,  
I knew he was starving.  
So away from the eyes of my husband, who believed  
him to be violent, and the other neighbors,

whose faceless shouts sometimes yelled  
at him from a window to shut up,  
I made him a peanut butter and jelly sandwich

and snuck it over to him.  
As I walked up he recognized me  
used my name, said he'd just ordered a pizza

and a buddy was on his way to pick him up to see a movie.  
Up close his long, soiled nails, scabs covering him,  
silent wild around his hollow eyes,  
he ate the sandwich in three bites.  
So began our relationship of me sneaking him food  
and him taking a break from the devil. Even

though some nights his ranting dragged on  
and I was the faceless neighbor shouting  
from my dark window for him to shut up.  
When the cops did finally listen and take him away,  
for I had chosen the right combination of words  
and unlocked their help, he yelled for me

as they dragged him to a gurney  
with his howling eyes and mouth like a vacant house  
called me by my name, *she's my friend, I'm fine, tell them I'm fine*  
all the neighbors now filtering out to watch as  
they rolled him away, to watch as  
I turned into a fruitless orange tree