

# Bone Cages

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A Lyric Memoir

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Bone Cages by Donora Hillard

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\*Buftthis

# Bone Cages

A Lyric Memoir

The following is based on interpretation, not fact. I don't claim to know the truth more than anyone else, as there are leaps in chronology, content, and perspective. Readers, especially those close to me, should bear these ideas in mind if they recognize themselves herein.

*White bones*

*hapless mortal*

*dear light of day*

*Your sins do you confess them?*

-- Anne Carson, "Eleven a.m." from *Men in the Off Hours*

*And there is the loss of innocence, in retrospection, in the safe distance of time. There are the clocks of shame, we tell the lie of time, and our hearts are broken.*

-- N. Scott Momaday, *The Names*

I.

He's thirty-two to my twenty-three. He's bothered by the age difference, but then I tell him there were thirty-seven years between another and me. I call him Rabbit since I know he will leave.

He's on the phone with his ex-wife in the next room. I'm trying to be quiet, but I can feel us dripping like candle wax down my thighs, leaving a stronger signature than I ever could.

*What happens now?* Rabbit asks. I ruffle his hair, stroke his hips. Tell him to put his novelist's mind to use as he did his good Protestant body on me. It all will come -- first, we'll write it.

## II.

I have a sex dream about my uncle. He's gangly, with a mouth like chicken skin. My father and mother stare.

I eat the same meal at the same place three days in a row. Watch the same people laugh at one another through a glass wall. Notice it looks like they're screaming.

I ponder the politics of failure, of desire. Bleed on the sheets. Go into the hotel bathroom and cut my fingernails off.

## III.

*Welcome to our hotel. We hope you appreciate the pains we take to make your stay pleasant. This manual provides a fuller impression of what we do here.*

*Check-In:*

*When you arrive, face creased and smeared, you lean across the counter while he struggles to find his credit card. If he is successful in the attempt, we take it from him and gladly pronounce it invalid. Take heart that more often than not, he's good for it, baby.*

I.

Rabbit's the kind of man every mother adores, and also the kind my father once said mine would leave him for: Blond. Ocean-eyed. Pale. Quiet. Thin.

He's from a town in southern Pennsylvania. He has a house made of brick with blue shutters. I take a picture of the tree growing in his backyard. Its flowers bloom like blood clots. It was there long before he arrived and will remain long after he's gone.

I look at this tree as we stand on his back deck to smoke. Neither of our families knows we do this.

II.

I'm ten years old. My father is forty-two, and my mother is forty. We've moved three times since I've been born and are building another, larger home less than one-half mile away from our current one. My father says we're *extending our circle of life*. My mother says he's being greedy. He looks at her like she's a strange bird, which is my nickname for her.

III.

*Rooms:*

*The living quarters are arranged according to age, gender, race, and sexual preference. Our staff measures these qualities as soon as you arrive and throughout the length of your stay. They determine your worth within our walls. Read on to see how each part of our rooms affects you.*

*Bathroom:*

*You spend hours preening here. The mirrors wrap around the room so you feel squeezed. They see more of your flesh than God and aren't afraid to give reports. They make it easier for us to watch you struggle into that little black dress. Raise your left arm and look over your shoulder again. That's it. We see everything.*

I.

Sometimes, Rabbit backs me into the wood and kisses me. Hard. He tells me to imagine we're in Oregon, and that I come home to a place that doesn't exist for us yet. He pushes me into the door and slides down the length of my body. There are trees above our house. I see them when I throw my head back and look through our front windows.

II.

At night, my father walks me to my room. There are numerous plush unicorns lined along the bed where a man will one day sleep. We say our prayers. Over time, the words begin bleeding into one another. Our hands flap without meaning.

III.

*Bedroom:*

*We take pride in our beds. They engulf you in layers of consolation. You feel like a pupa within them -- isn't that what he wants? Soon you walk for him, nude or in heels if it pleases. There's a mirror behind the headboard for him to gaze at you while stripped of clothing and esteem. We suggest you never close your legs.*

*Living Room:*

*Each shared space boasts several Edward Hopper prints and a loveseat in a loud shade of lilac. You sit naked upon it and insist how nice it all is. You reassure him about what just took place, saying over and over that yes, you did. You hate yourself for the sick slickness of it but push the sensation aside. Congratulations!*

I.

Rabbit and I argue about what we mean to one another. We call each other *buddies, pals*. We finally decide on *best friends*. According to one of my students, *Friends with benefits are people with whom you can have sex without attachment, and then go get a milkshake*. We keep getting milkshakes to test this theory.

## II.

My mother has considered leaving my father, who views me as a distraction. There are letters she wrote but never gave him that say so. I've read these letters, but she doesn't know that. They fight daily, screaming at one another while I hide behind the overstuffed couch in our living room.

When I'm older, I'll insist all parents battle this much. I'll tell strangers nothing that happened in my home was traumatic or unusual. *I refuse to be made into a victim*, I'll say, though I'll selfishly want others to ask about it. I'll wear lots of black. I'll love words like *wrong*. I'll lie to myself and begin believing.

## III.

*Room Service:*

*When the meal arrives, you're in your lingerie from the previous hour. No matter. He either tells you to flee into the bedroom or stay in the communal area to show your wares to the attendant. One man places nourishment before you, the other gives an inflated tip, and you are permitted to consume.*

I.

I watch Rabbit shave his face. He wears boxer shorts. His skin is wet and clean. He attacks the sandy bristles on his cheeks. They fall one after another after another. Though I've lived with a man before, this one seems like a rare beast. I tense my abdominal muscles. I pace. I pin my shoulders back as I used to in ballet.

Each time I leave the room and walk back into it, I tell myself I'll be a different person. This uncharacteristic giddiness will end. I'll be cooler, detached. I'll look him in the eye without trembling or clenching my thighs together. This never happens. The bristles keep falling.

II.

My father rips around the house, dark hair burning into his forehead. He yells that my mother *has her head up her ass*; that she works too much; that she'll leave him for a pale, quiet, thin man.

I'm the soft, only child. I try talking about school, about swimming. My father tells me the meal I had the night before *was full of fat, by the way*. I'll forget these words until I'm diagnosed with anorexia four years later.

III.

*Health Suite:*

*Our million-dollar facility is open twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. It is stocked with equipment of the highest quality, including elliptical trainers and the ever-present Nautilus. Cool water and fresh towels are available at all times. Use these items to stay refreshed and stave off unsightly wetness.*

*The torment of your muscles is displayed in numerous full-length mirrors placed strategically around the room. Refer to these often. Also, pay great attention to the large-screen television that broadcasts the bodies you imitate in order to keep your partner quiet, but not satisfied.*

I.

When we started, Rabbit told me he loved me then said, *I think you should forget what I said, even though it's what I'm feeling. It's too soon and it's fucking everything up.*

I ask how a person can voluntarily forget being told they're loved, especially if they've been damaged by a previous lack thereof. *Don't put me on a pedestal*, he says.

*Come here. Give me your hand*, I want to tell him. *I didn't ask for any of this, but I would be damned if I didn't protect it. So would you.*

## II.

As my parents' voices reach fever pitch, I consider possession. I run into the kitchen, grab a pair of dull scissors from the junk drawer, and cut a thick lock of my bangs off. I lay on the Oriental rug in the entryway, sobbing. *You're going to make a neurotic out of that kid!* my mother yells to my father from the top of the stairs. I climb them to my room and look at the plush unicorns. They stare back at me with their glittery eyes and purple fur. I look at my reflection and laugh. I talk loudly to no one. There is nothing else I can do.

## III.

*Check-Out:*

*Check-out usually takes place between denial and shame. The contact lenses are in and the hair is curled, evidence of careful insertion and removal. Many come and go, but we trust we made an impression. We'll see you again.*

*Sincerely, The Staff*

I.

Rabbit and I take long walks with his greyhound. I stiffen whenever a family passes by. My chest feels like overripe fruit on the vine and tries to pull me down toward the concrete.

In these moments, I like to think he and I haven't met yet. We haven't made love but we're going to, and his expression is like a lens waiting to flash. It's as if what I want might matter.

## II.

I begin developing. My father doesn't enter my room again until I turn twenty. When he wants to ask a question or tell me something, he stands approximately fifteen feet from the entrance and yells to me. He refuses to cross the threshold or even look inside, lest he or I see something we shouldn't. Something.

My mother has no such fear of my room as long as I'm present. When I'm home, she comes in. When I'm not there, she refuses to enter save to dust or vacuum. Without my company, she says, she worries she might find something - a box of condoms, a marriage license, nipple clamps. She calls it a sacred place.

## III.

*Damaged people are dangerous. They know they can survive.*

-- Josephine Hart, *Damage*

*Here's where I tell you too much.*

*Wrong isn't a cruel word. It isn't word that burns. It's a hulking, stupid word.*

*It's a word with acne and glasses. It's a word no one wants.*

I.

It's New Year's Eve. After Rabbit leaves I prowl the house, my body's center hollow from where his mouth has been. It's the only time I leave our dishes and knives out to dry, expecting a call of regret that doesn't come. In a few hours, couples will clamp together to count the final, heavy seconds, so unlike his lightly-carried weight. I've no want of control now, no use for a time that isn't ours, no haughty resolution.

II.

My mother and I apply our faces together. She sits at her vanity as I stand in front of the gilded mirror. This custom can cause great harm. It can manipulate men and transform you into a fallen creature, she says without words.

III.

*I have no desire to protect the innocent or otherwise, but I don't want to use his name. Call him the Poet. I only remember a few statements that passed between us. The rest is a shattered skeleton. To put those bones back together, I have to become seventeen again.*

I.

I travel without Rabbit. At the terminal, I look for signs I recognize: Women, Security, Men, Gates, Checkpoints. I see all versions of the paranoid and high-strung sucked into cell phones or clacking away on laptops. A bottle of cranberry juice costs over two dollars.

A couple embraces as though they're about to be ripped apart for the last time. She wears sandals and a skirt, even though it's thirty degrees outside, and holds a pair of crutches. They kiss for what seems like hours. I can't make it any clearer than that. When they separate, she sets her face as hard as the belly of the beast they seal me into.

II.

In using makeup with my mother, I indulge in physicality. Getting out of my mind helps negotiate the split between *the half-comic, half-tragic tale of the inside versus the outside.*\*

III.

*I sit with my father in our kitchen in summer, eating breakfast and reading the local newspaper. I come across a weekly column by a writer from central Pennsylvania. He lists his email address for those wanting to ask questions about the craft, so I write him saying I'm a young poet in need of suggestions. I receive a cryptic reply stating he's also a poet, and I should send along some samples of my writing. I do.*

\*Sontag

I.

You'd think there would be a better way to traverse the country than this as a line of neon lights pulls me across the tarmac and away from Rabbit. Grandiose blues, greens, reds, and yellows catch the runway in their artificial fire.

The huge tube hiccups. Everyone around me erupts. If they're going to die, they'll go down gossiping. Here we are, at the final ascent, and the lines between duty and love are blurred. It's a process. It's the greyest area there is.

II.

My mother cakes her skin; I follow with mascara. Am I wrong in enjoying this? Some might say so. I'm not saying I'm beautiful; I'm saying in the absence of beauty, there would always be something. Look closer.

III.

*The Poet returns my manuscript within one week, marked with comments and questions including, "Are you ever happy?" I send him a final email to thank him for his time. The day after, he sends me a message with, "Now it's my turn to find you."*

I.

The night sky looks dangerous. I think of houses below with upstairs lights on, whether ex-husbands and wives are still getting together after dark. I remember making love after the separation, how I kept my head in Rabbit's lap as though nothing happened before.

Our flight attendant is Demetrius. I like Demetrius. She asks if I want the entire can of ginger ale, not just the plastic cup. I imagine she can see thirst licking away at me, but she's only doing her job. I kiss the cross around my neck and feel the cabin pressure drop.

II.

This game is called shredding the document. Away from my family, it becomes routine. I run to the cafeteria and grab slices of broccoli pizza, sugar cookies, and swirls of frozen yogurt heaped with grainy sprinkles. I suck down Diet Coke and run back to the dormitory where I hunch over porcelain and let it go, the bread, my soul, the joke of this being what I do when those above me throw my body into water and devour my mind. The narrative dissolves.

III.

*I soon find out the Poet is in his mid-fifties and married. He's been married four times previously. He has two children from the first of these, both of which eclipse me in age by decades. As these truths are made evident, I don't much care.*

*I've fallen into a trap occupied by formerly chubby, frizzy-haired female artists: No one understands my work. No one understands me. I'm utterly alone. In retrospect, my skull's nasty talk is annoying as hell. At the time, it's all I know.*

I.

In another version, this day hasn't happened yet. It isn't snowing on the first of spring underneath me. There's no sickening grief. There's only peace. I don't question it. I allow the sun to bathe my face.

My students don't ask me out when they notice there's no ring anymore. I go to A.A. meetings because I want to understand the Count, the man who came before Rabbit. I don't have to murder his memory.

## II.

A tanned waiter at an overpriced restaurant in Texas watches me eat dinner alone. The open room buzzes with the hazy energy of a late afternoon. I'm here on business. My family is far away. So is Rabbit, though there are signs of him everywhere. One of his favorite songs drips on me from the speakers . . .

*Well I did not think the girl could be so cruel/And I'm never going back to my old school*

. . . He's here even before I step onto the grainy sidewalk and into the thick night, the air tobacco-scented though no one else in Austin seems to smoke. I miss my mother, who tried to hide the fact she smoked from me for a decade. So did my father, who inhaled cigars on the upstairs deck after I'd gone to sleep.

## III.

*The Poet supposes my hair is the color of autumn and that I probably look like Klimt's Danae. You know her. She was the daughter of Acrisius and Eurydice who was imprisoned by her father in a bronze chamber. Zeus came to her in a flood of golden semen and she became the mother of Perseus, who sliced off Medusa's head. The Poet's pap seems so profound I figure I'd best entrust him with the rest of me.*

I.

The pilot comes on and hisses about an emergency landing. Sensors have failed.  
We'll hit the ground at twice the normal speed.

What can I give? *I'm sorry*, I said to the Count before I left him. *I was so afraid of you*. Simple words are never enough. Never.

*Oh God I don't want it to end this way but if it does let it be among this humming around me in this warm place.*

II.

The tanned waiter hovers over my left shoulder. He asks how everything is as I'm about to bite into the quesadilla he's placed in front of me. I pause, mouth open. *Sorry*, he says. It's as though he's caught me in something sacred, the opening and closing of lips, the teeth like small, white stones, the velvet tongue laid bare.

III.

*I turn eighteen that October, but the Poet waits until the following April to visit. The day after my parents' twenty-seventh wedding anniversary, I say I'm spending the night at a friend's house and cart myself to the Days Inn. I park behind a nearby Friendly's. My careful anticipation, the bullshit I worry about, kills me.*

I.

I keep Rabbit's words near at the conference where there's too much noise and too many writers fumbling and saying, *Man, let's get lit after the readings*. Some tell me I'll never pull this off, that I *can't* stand in front of a crowd and tell them what I've done.

Those with me lend support. I don't mention I want the cockroach-like crystal chandelier to come crashing down on others' heads.

I ask forgiveness for crossing in front of swift vans, wanting only to be spirited away to the northeast, to quiet and cool clarity. I want to rise early beneath ivory sheets, to hear his low, smooth tones. I want out of this rough dust that burns my face, this heat.

II.

The tanned waiter will never know what it takes for me to sit in front of a mirror and eat, to watch my reflection chewing and swallowing. I still search for the expanding skin, the uneven chin Rabbit thinks is one of the best parts of me. I learned to fear the fever and shame of flesh, hunger, and thirst. Father and mother. Daughter and lover.

III.

*The elevator at the Days Inn is dim, with smeared mirrored paneling like a funhouse. A businessman and what appears to be a young Asian escort watches the Poet and me enter, then keep their eyes glued to the filthy glass.*

I.

On Good Friday, I nearly blow out my speakers speeding down the interstate toward Rabbit. I laugh. There are no false miracles, though when his hands pass over me I'm left reborn.

Two years ago, the Count was on a different interstate, speeding down to me. I want to tell the girl I was then to *Stop. Don't do it.* Reverse the bruises I know will soon appear on my skin.

If this is a form of worship, I'll take the hit. I'll be that fallen woman. I'll crave the scrape my knees make when I go down on them. I'll dig my tongue into a chocolate egg to get the cream out.

II.

The tanned waiter asks if I'm a writer. I tell him. I get up to leave and spill the saltshaker. I pinch some fallen grains between my fingers, throw them over my left shoulder for luck like my mother told me to, and walk out.

III.

*We're given a rusty key instead of a plastic card. I'm unsure why I stay for the thick click it makes inside the lock. I partially know crossing the threshold will be my undoing, but I can't see beyond the Poet.*

I.

Rabbit doesn't exist to me yet when I get drunk for the first time in my life with the Count, the man who claims he married me in the womb. He's been sober for over half as long as I've been alive.

None of my relatives have succumbed to alcohol-related illness, though I remember one Christmas Eve when my mother, tipsy from Vladimir, fell over doing high kicks in my aunt's kitchen.

## II.

*. . . for I have conquered the world.*

-- John 16:33

At my father's Pentecostal church back home, there *isn't fund-raising, only faith-raising*. EVERYTHING IS POSSIBLE!, hangs above the stage in gold. Women speak in tongues, look up, and extend fuchsia nails to heaven. Some wave flags. They all scream.

I look down to watch the soft gold cross that pulses patient at my throat. He can have the world if He wants. Give me the boy whose leg breaks beneath him in a car accident and the man who learns how to make love in a backseat on a night in late January.

## III.

*I can't see beyond the Poet because the photographs in our home show a family bent on proving their love. I smile so hard my face looks pained.*

*I can't see beyond him because I need to do something as clandestine and revolting as the manner in which I've been taught to exist.*

I.

I've heard those who drink only care about *hangin' out on the old logging road with a half and a package of Solo cups*. I say I can do sober what most do drunk, but I also worry I might like it too much if I started. A tattoo on my right scapula says it all: PROTECT ME FROM WHAT I WANT.

In high school, I was asked numerous times to attend drinking parties; I could just never justify going. I sometimes see the Count as the boys who breathed hot invitations into my ear, begging me to join them in some backwoods cabin. Their eyes all had the eerie sheen of broken bottles.

II.

*It's a representation, ordinary pornography. It's a fallen art form. It's not just make-believe, it's patently insincere.*

-- Philip Roth, *The Dying Animal*

*Stop writing porn and we'll give you money.*

III.

*The hotel room is the picture of sterility. Trinkets I sent the Poet are strewn about. He brought a personal stereo. An old cocoa tin full of condoms is placed on the bedside table.*

I.

I know good wine, but I drink Thunderbird, the Count's former weapon of choice. It's \$3.99 a bottle, bright yellow and vile. He used to down gallons of the stuff for years. Then he turned green and went to rehab.

I knock back the first sip, not sure if *knocking back* is in fashion. Sting's *The Soul Cages* is on. I vow to drink a fraction of the Thunderbird before another song. If I miss, I punish myself by drinking more. I down the entire bottle in less than fifteen minutes.

II.

My father calls me a pornographer as I finish packing. My bedroom is cold and most of my belongings are already stowed away inside cardboard. This move has been a long time coming. I place Anais Nin on top of a box of books, seal it, and turn to face him. He has just returned from Wednesday night Bible study. I know not to deny him attention when he's feeling righteous.

III.

*I set my overnight bag down and sit on the edge of the bed. The Poet takes a seat at one of the tables present in every room. He knew what I looked like from publication photos but had never had the opportunity to rake his eyes over me in person before. "You're so gorgeous," he says.*

I.

We drive. I shout slurred suggestions about what roads to take. The Count suggests I toss the bottle out the window for effect. I nearly succeed in shattering it against the enamel frame before releasing it. Evidently, the glamour of this process eludes me. The loud orange moon makes my skull throb.

The notes get progressively incoherent. There's one that stands out, a question I don't remember asking: *How many pairs of panties do you own?* I even answer myself: *Eight, ten -- I don't wear them often.* Soon, I stop looking at the paper altogether. I let my head bob up and down, scribbling madly in the dark.

II.

*No one will respect you if you write that shit, my father says with features fixed.*

*Well, the professors at Rutgers seem to respect it. It's good enough for them.*

III.

*The Poet's body is well-preserved from years of running, but he's shorter than me by several inches. He also has no hair anywhere -- not even any eyebrows or eyelashes. This alarms me, but I tell my teenage self that baldness is sexy.*

*We sit in silence. Then I do something I don't realize the significance of: I take my earrings out. I've done this many times with my partner since and I know what it means. The Poet lunges onto the bed and takes me down with him.*

I.

The Count and I arrive home safely. I slide across the floor on my stomach, flicking my tongue. *I'm a snake!* I insist. I manage to slither into the bathroom before losing my dinner. He holds my hair.

We attend a reception a few weeks later. My cousin Annette is beside us. Annette probably weighs over three-hundred pounds. When I was younger, my mother warned me to never drink soda lest I *end up like Annette and never find a husband*. Small wonder anorexia soon followed. I only drank Diet Insert Cancer-Causing Flavor Here and didn't menstruate for three years.

Annette enjoys cheap beer nearly as much. With the help of my other cousins, she consumes no less than five full pitchers in an hour. I'm amazed. When asked if he wants some, the Count declines: *It's an allergy*.

II.

*It doesn't matter, my father growls. All I know is you can't screw this up. If you decide to get lazy or take time off, you won't be successful.*

*I started taking college classes when I was sixteen! I've never taken time off, and I don't plan to --*

*Another thing, he cuts in. I know what you two do and I don't like it. You just go over there after work to sleep and fuck.*

III.

*The action fades in and out. The Poet quickly removes my jeans and orange sweatshirt. I'm wearing the only black satin underwear I own to appear experienced and mature. He flips me over on top of him. This is foreign territory. He tears off his t-shirt and shoves my face toward the lower end of his stomach.*

I.

The Count looks on as my mother pulls me onto the dance floor, which is covered with my relatives and their gyrating offspring.

Annette heaves her body across the parquet, leading several to gasp and laugh. She tries coaxing me into the center. I'm reminded of my Uncle Norm, who consumed mass quantities of liquor at his son Mark's wedding years before. We watched in horror as Norm, former God among uncles, flung his leathery forearms into the air and screamed, *GET LAID! GET FUCKED!* during *Mony Mony*.

I look at the Count, who's been watching the Annette spectacle all along. He despises vertical movement, but I motion for him anyway. We dance, dry as bones.

II.

*That isn't true, I say, a deep acid ache spreading through me.*

*My father roars about the Count: He doesn't even buy you anything! Not only does he get a piece of ass, he gets it for free! You walk around in those high heels. You think you're cute, but you look like a goddamn fool. Only whores act that way.*

III.

*That's when I see the scar. It stretches from the waxy skin of his navel to his hairless groin. I could follow it for days, guess its implications, but I'm lost.*

*He tells me to suck him. He's eel-like. I half-expect it to get up and start flopping around the room, out the door and away from us. It doesn't. It does nothing.*

I.

One night, the Count says, *You strike me as a person who goes to the grocery store every day. Why don't you have a pantry?* I draw in my breath. This is serious. I know of his splits with others. Their shopping habits all played a part:

*She ate at Burger King! She never bought anything on sale! She only liked what tasted good!*

I get on my knees and extend my arms before the cans and coffee, before the High Priestess of the Pantry. I bite my lip. The Count doesn't appreciate this. He says, *You stayed down there too long.* I say, *Your steak is tough on my tongue.*

II.

*Dad, I don't know how you can say these things to me after coming home.  
You shouldn't disrespect the body you made.*

*Well, at least I don't write pornography!* he yells, turning on his meaty heels and storming toward the other end of the house.

III.

*I don't know being addicted to alcohol and anti-depressants as the Poet is can render one incapable of maintaining arousal. I put him in my mouth again and inhale his aged, yeasty smell. He chokes out suggestions as I bob up and down like a Barbie on speed. Nothing happens and I start to get angry.*

I.

I'm living with the Count in a converted carriage house and working as a graduate assistant. Our writing program has its June Residency. There's a Satyr. Mid-fifties. Everyone knows him. *That guy's a god*, they say. He touches my arm one day. *Walk with me*, he says. He wants to thank me for hand-selecting his room, which I haven't done. He takes me there anyway.

There's red wine. I drink some. *A year ago, I was in Colombia*, Satyr says. *The cocaine was fantastic. The marijuana was fantastic. But you think I could find a decent cup of coffee?* He asks if I want more wine. *Any more would knock me out*, I say. He laughs. *That would be cool*, he says. I see myself unconscious, his hand covering my sex like a shell. I stand up and walk back.

II.

I exhale slowly, trying to keep my father's words from catching in my skin. Something like this happens at least once a month. On Easter Sunday, probably while the Resurrection was taking place, my mother came into my bedroom and threw a literary journal at my head. She stamped her feet, pronounced it contained *pornographic garbage*, and took off down the hall.

III.

*I sit up and tell the Poet I want to stop. He says he's sorry. He asks if I want some hard lemonade or pills. I say no to the pills but am dry and upset enough to have some of the drink. He begins jerking off. I should get up and leave right there, but I don't. I start to insult him instead.*

I.

I call the Count. He's in Utica, visiting his mother. I say, *I want you home. Now.* I can't say why. We fight. He calls me a cunt. I cry. *We're about to eat now*, I hear his mother say. *I hope she understands.* He hangs up. I shower and dress for the party the program is having that night.

Night is a great excuser. I make a huge batch of Sangria and don't drink any of it. A spoken-word artist says she likes my lips. A group of fiction writers, plus Satyr, grab harmonicas and sing the blues. I check my messages. I need the Count to say he's on his way home. He never does.

II.

I knew what *pornographic garbage* my mother meant. I wrote it. There was no talk of engorgement or throbbing, beefy torpedoes. It read like a hotel manual.

III.

*Call it misguided love. Twine whips up from beneath the bedposts. The Poet ties my ankles and wrists. He fucks me with a candle. He decides that's boring and undoes me. I'm silent. (Does that mean Yes oh you who will tell me?) My contact lenses burn and scratch.*

I.

Near dawn, I see Satyr snoring on the couch. I kneel beside him and say his name. His eyes peel open. *You're beautiful*, he says. *I want to go home with you*. As the husband wants the wife to be clean, the wife wants the husband to be -- still? Strong? No. I want the Count to drink me.

I look at Satyr instead. His feet are tattooed. His hand closes on the back of my neck. He pulls me toward his mouth. *Kind of Blue* plays low. I pull myself back up. I go home alone. The last thing I hear before I close my eyes is the Count's voice on the line, drowsy, distant, disinterested.

II.

To me, pornography represents the truth so loosely it verges on being comical. It's in this denial that art becomes fallen. If anything, my father and mother are pornographers in their refusal to acknowledge the truth about what happened to me as a teenager.

III.

*I have no concept of how long the Poet is on top of me. I keep telling myself "If he comes in me, he must love me. If he comes in me, I can continue to love him. If he comes in me, all will be well. If he comes . . ."*

I.

A former student asks if I believe in casual sex. He looks like a model in a catalogue where the boys have ruddy, gleaming cheeks and panting dogs beside them. This Boy knows I'm separated from the Count and says *it can get lonely*. He says I seemed interested before.

II.

Hard acknowledgment of the truth has never been my family's strong point. They always feel it necessary to protect me from everything. What they don't realize is that in doing so, they effectively deny me valuable experiences painful and otherwise. This denial forces me to seek both pain and pleasure on my own, and in extremes.

III.

*The Poet finishes. "That was stupid," he says. He turns his head away. Everything goes out for an instant, and I curse myself for loving what he gave.*

I.

I remember why the Boy thinks we have a relationship. We walked to my office one day so he could hand his final portfolio in. He noticed the black bruise that covered over half of my left arm, then asked me about living with the Count. *Occupational hazard*, I said. *Tough break*, he said back. *Get out of there*.

## II.

These extremes again show themselves in the photographs that clutter my parents' oversized home. I remind myself that without them, my adolescence is a skeleton with nothing around or inside it, a collection of bone cages.

## III.

*I'm often told my experience with the Poet reads like a police report. Some call it sexual assault. Some call it an ugly loss-of-virginity memory, and "everyone has those." Some even call it the result of a writer's wild lifestyle.*

*I used to believe what I thought mattered. It doesn't. People want a good story with a neat bit of self-analysis and resolution. They want to see growth. They want the young woman to learn something in a hundred pages.*

I.

*With a cold fixed stare / She's cursed with insight / And you can't repair / She's  
broken inside*

Paul Westerberg is singing. As I hear *her blacks crackle and drag*, I realize he's paying homage to Plath.

After my separation, I hide below Rabbit's hip as Plath huddled in her father's figurative ear. But the Count isn't the new Colossus, and thank God I'm not her.

II.

In a shot of the Virgin Island horizon, my parents and I stand with our arms around one another. Things are happening. They pose just slightly in front to block my protruding breastplate, clavicle, and pelvis. The sun beats down in a blinding wave. Wrecked vegetation engulfs our feet.

III.

*Sometimes, there isn't anything to hold. I learn about being wronged, wrongdoing, and wrongness. I realize I can be part of all of it. Now I want it gone.*

*Wrong isn't a cruel word. It isn't word that burns. It's a hulking, stupid word. It's a word with acne and glasses. It's a word no one wants.*

I.

The Count and I call each other *lover* to soften the blow our separation brings. *Think of it as "husband" with fewer letters*, the man who stood toe to toe with me and swore death says. *How you feel is no longer my responsibility* is another pitted gem from him. *I miss my husband. I want my husband. My husband is dead*, I'd written to a friend. Why let this warm ghost break bread with me and talk of beating his flesh to my image again? *Don't settle for the house, dog, and blue-eyed boy just yet*, he bristles, his own irises like wet moss. One day, it'll be enough. Then I'll tell him how the story ends.

## II.

In the months preceding the trip when this picture was taken, I had developed an anorexia/bulimia hybrid. My family decides we should escape to St. Thomas for a week. Nothing goes as expected. Before our plane touches down, we learn a tropical storm has demolished many of the island's trees and several resort buildings. No matter. As we near our suite, the only things I want to do are run on the Cybex treadmill in the health club and eat oatmeal.

## III.

*Youth faced with indiscretion, I run up to the cul-de-sac beyond our house and into the woods to burn the file that holds the Poet's letters.*

*Stepping over shattered bottles, I find a dark place and light a match. Flames start slowly but spread like oiled water, slick and dangerous.*

I.

The Count and I can't use condoms -- *They cut off my circulation*, he says -- so I try birth control pills, something I once swore I would never do. My nurse practitioner says I'll experience a *small amount of breakthrough bleeding*, but I tell her I'll handle it.

II.

My parents seem to take little issue with my malnutrition. As medical professionals, they should.

*How's your oatmeal?* my father asks.

*Oh, it's great,* I say, throwing some raisins on it.

*Are you sure?* My mother's stabbing at a chef's salad and not paying much attention to us. She used to eat ice for lunch.

*Just don't force it,* my father says. *You don't want to feel too full.*

I couldn't have been less full had I taken a Dustbuster to my insides. I continue to starve.

III.

*I wait, stirring the grey, prodding the flame. I kneel beside the Poet's burning words until the edges fall away and I can dance on the fragile black of what remains.*

*When I'm home I still breathe that air sometimes, the charred earth and script, the freedom of ash as it breaks away and moves skyward.*

I.

We go to visit the Count's mother, who lives alone in Utica. His father is dead. He left the family before the Count could walk after trying to murder the child, then shot himself in the Philippines. His ghost is everywhere.

He's the pitch in their voices. He's the fracture in their conversations. He's the empty space in dusty photographs that line the walls. He's the black in the Count's hair, the muscled curve in his back, and the way his hand goes to his mouth after he speaks.

II.

The low point comes the next day when, after running six miles in the morning and swimming dozens of laps, I nearly collapse at an abandoned pirate fort. There's something absurd about climbing steps where swashbucklers once stood and not having the energy to keep your knees locked. My parents either pretend or really don't notice me swaying and gripping the rusty bar that separates us from a cliff that drops off into the ocean.

III.

*I also destroy the Poet's photograph, that one sense of his age I couldn't shake. He had sent me several in the beginning -- a corner of whiskey eyes, an opening between hands clasped in mock prayer, a slice of sweat-slick biceps. He developed them in his own darkroom. They were faded from the sheen of late sunlight striking the places we knew marked the signs staked between us.*

I.

All weekend, I bleed. It pours out of me hour after hour. My clothes soak in it. Nothing I do contains or lessens it. The beagle comes and noses between my legs. I try to brush him away as quickly and quietly as I can. *Down, Yogi*, the Count's mother says.

II.

My other clear memory of the trip is captured on VHS. I stumble along a beach on St. John. I stop and stretch before the sapphire sea, letting my towel billow out behind me. I'm wearing a hot-pink bikini purchased as a reward for dropping below one-hundred pounds. Considering my bone structure and height, this looks ridiculous. My mother's steady camerawork lingers on the parts of my body that ache the most.

III.

*No one else would have guessed what the images meant, but they were the same ones the Poet had traced along my body. His eyes pierce me as they did when he left me at that cheap hotel, what he could afford, my skin streaked gold with early light.*

I.

The Count and I go to the Utica cemetery. He stands in front of a headstone that reads Hesse. I take a picture.

I call my nurse practitioner and ask why I'm bleeding so much. *I followed the directions*, I say. She pauses. *You may be pregnant. Wait a few days, then test to be sure.* She hangs up.

I look at the Count, who's silent. Headstones line the green like pieces of chalk. The cemetery hums. *Sex and death are great equalizers*, I say.

II.

My family and I rarely talk about that trip. I soon stop going away with them. I outwardly attribute this to reaching my twenties, living with someone, and going to graduate school. They deny this reality, crowding out the old.

III.

*Why did you let the Poet break you open instead of me?*

*Break you open.* My friend deftly handles this phrase that puts a crack in the universe. We sit in a pub on a Wednesday. He drinks Miller Lite as I duck under a cloud of his Marlboro Menthol smoke. I bring him to the end:

*With my feet on the ground for the first time that day, the Poet orders me to leave his home immediately. He says my name. It was the first and last time he'll speak it with any clarity. His dogs surround me, snapping at my ankles.*

I.

After the cemetery, the Count and I fuck on his mother's floor. He puts his whole hand inside me. It's so dark that when he withdraws, it looks like every inch of him is covered in clotted red. There's no pain, and for a moment I think I've died.

His hands are slick with me like he's wearing gloves. He stares at them, and then goes to wash up. When he comes back, I ask what's wrong. He tells me the most horrifying story I've ever heard.

II.

My family moves several times throughout my adolescence. The one that brings us to our current home is entirely unnecessary. We go from living in a pleasant house in a well-respected neighborhood to a massive, overdone affair.

III.

*The Poet's wife comes stamping down the driveway, gravel grinding beneath her heels. I'm the undeniable intruder. For once, his words are unabated by passion, rain, wind, or any other natural disaster that could have spared the rod or spoiled the child.*

*"She brought a lunchbox," she chirps, mocking my makeshift purse. She doesn't seem to get this running away business doesn't account for fashion. It was all they had at the drugstore I had taken off from my house to before I took a cab to the bus station.*

I.

The Count was sixteen. His father had been gone since he was four months old, so his friends raised him. He was always menacingly drunk. There was a party. There was a girl. He remembers going upstairs and laying down. He remembers pressure on top of him and not being able to move. He woke up *dizzy and sticky in places I shouldn't have been*. There was blood on his hands, and he didn't know how it got there.

II.

This forced intimacy has followed my family the entire time. The place is much too big for three people. Two of us can be at one end of it and never hear the third. We bang around inside its thin walls, lost. Trying to fill it with furniture doesn't change anything.

III.

*His wife's laugh terrifies me. It breaks a mouth that looks as though it has tasted only lemons and semen. I'm eighteen. She could be a kid sister of mine, throwing a tantrum because someone stole her favorite stuffed animal, worn but loved.*

*The Poet looks too much like a father and husband, then like nothing human: a mechanical parakeet seen in an arcade fortune-telling machine, or a glass bottle I could take to bed to make myself bleed and kill whatever we had created inside me.*

I.

The Count's first thought was, *Where's my gun?* He ran downstairs. His friend caught him by the arm and said, *Man, I don't know exactly, but something just happened to you. That girl is fucked up. She slipped you something. She was a virgin. There . . . there's something wrong with her.* His face is blank as he says this. I can't breathe.

## II.

I've always known that even as our locations change, our situation remains the same. I only want the truth. When I try to tell my family about this or write about it, they laugh, scream, or call me obscene.

## III.

*The Poet tells me to come into the fluorescence of the garage and I refuse. Our activities have never been exposed to light. He runs back up to the house. She stands in the bay of his pickup truck and stares. "You're very pretty," she says. "I love your hair."*

*Staggering and stuttering, he returns. Approaching the house in a triangle, she denies his help while I stumble clumsily ahead. Guardians are summoned. Conversation slows its processes to survive the evening's frigidity.*

*I reject all sources of warmth save for coffee, which I drink black. I don't want to purloin any additional pleasure in her presence. The Poet and I stare at the cement. I have never been so cold. The fine hair on my forearms stands straight up.*

I.

*M-maybe it didn't happen, I say to the Count. You were unconscious, right?*

*Maybe this girl lied.*

*I don't think so, he says.*

*Why not?*

*I trust the source.*

*You mean HER?*

*No, I trust my friend. The next day he cornered her, held a gun to her head, and threatened to blow her skull apart unless she told him the truth.*

II.

I say to my family: *Do what you are going to do, and I will tell about it.\**

III.

*The Poet's eyes soften and mine go to liquid. Our mouths meet momentarily. Fingertips cling to their goodbyes and fall away as they often do in these stories. Heads cradle in hands. I know that somewhere a poem is being written, mute and terribly alone.*

\*Olds

I.

When the Count and I get back, I find out I'm not pregnant. I wait three months and stop taking the pills. I wait another six months and leave the house.

Once I meet Rabbit, I decide to get an IUD. With my knees in the air, I feel a sharp cramp. I think about how the words *sharp* and *cramp* hang together.

There's a cemetery across from the hospital. I imagine my legs splayed among the ghosts that failed like the Count's father, my thighs cold as tombstones.

II.

I'm tired of dodging my mother's bitter coldness and father's harsh heat. Complacency kills. So do denial and insincerity. If I fell to the level of accepting these, then I'd be a pornographer.

III.

*In the end, a pen and paper are the only witnesses. I pile my hair on top of my head to look less cavernous, but no one is fooled. I soak in a tepid bath, a sledgehammer in my stomach.*

*The thought of the Poet's pain is my barbiturate. I place myself in common with the rest of his life. In the kitchen he shares with his wife, on the calendar, he's marked the date of my graduation.*

I.

The clinician slides a yellow spike into my uterus, followed by a thin, iron rod. *You're very deep*, she murmurs. *Your partner must be grateful*. Her instruments come out slick crimson. She throws them into the sink, says I'm a perfect patient, and tells me to get up. My blood is on her hands. I think of people who eat bread off the chests of the dead to absorb their burdens. Sin eaters. The Count tells me that I must keep this story. I can't.

It's yours now.

Donora Hillard is the author of *Parapherna*, available from Dancing Girl Press. Her lyric memoir and poetry have appeared in *Pebble Lake Review*, *The Pedestal Magazine*, *Wicked Alice*, and many others. She's been an instructor of writing at King's College and currently teaches in southern Pennsylvania.