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Local

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Local

Capstone Manuscript
Jane Barnes

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Locale

4334 Main St.

The house I grew up in
would have been the perfect setting
for a white trash horror film.

A used car dealership
on one side, and on the other lived
an elderly Vietnam war veteran.
He had PTSD and every morning he'd make
his own 'Agent Orange' concoction
and spray his entire lawn with it,
ensuring not a single blade of grass survived.

The house itself was built in 1903
and hadn't been renovated since the 70's.
As a child, I was not allowed to have friends
over. My father said it was because
the house was haphazard and embarrassing;
if parents saw it they would not have let
their children play with me anymore.

We brushed our teeth at the kitchen sink.

The living room had wood-
paneled walls, a yellow couch,
and a Christmas tree that stayed up all year.

My father's bedroom was upstairs, then down the hallway
a small single bathroom and a "spare room"
which contained: knives disguised as credit cards, guns,
a pack n' play, and several tattoo machines.

A large, ape-like creature lurked
in the corridor between my room and the attic.

My father never saw him, but I did. I'd catch glimpses
of his dark fur when I sprinted from my room
to the bathroom or in the dark of my room when
I'd stare at the door long enough to see through it.

Terrified, I'd stay awake most of the night

watching reruns of Home Improvement
until the sun started to rise and I was safe
from the Ape-Man.

Once, I got in trouble for tearing
the shower curtain rod out of the wall
because the Ape-Man was there,
lurking, waiting to devour me.
My father did not believe this.

I never got to know the Ape-Man then,
but I'm afraid he's found me now. I don't know what
he wants from me, but it's probably the same thing
he wanted when I lived in that house.

Lancaster, Pennsylvania

There are six of them:

Mom, dad, and baby sit on the stoop of a single-wide trailer.
Mom's got a thin chain of barbed wire tattooed around her ankle
obscured by a clunky ankle monitor.

Dad precariously balances
the baby on his lap with his right hand,
and tries to light the joint dangling
from his mouth with his left.

The other three children play outside:
The toddler eats dirt and worms,
while twins fight over a plastic hula-hoop.
The boy hits his sister in the face and takes the toy.
She inhales sharply, then shrieks.

The parents turn to see what's happening and then
"GOD FUCKING DAMN IT!"
dad fumbles the baby on the concrete steps and she begins to cry as well.
In a panic, he scrambles to pick her up and the joint falls
out of his mouth and onto the her bare belly
marking her with a small circular burn.

She sobs louder.
Jesus christ.

Northampton, Pennsylvania

When I was thirteen
my fifteen-year-old best friend Misty
tattooed “my daddy will kill you” across her pubis.

Three months later her daddy
shot and killed his brother-in-law point blank.
They were both high on meth.

Soon after, Misty’s grandfather was busted
for cooking meth in his trailer.

My favorite coffee shop was near Misty’s house.

In high school we’d sneak out of class early,
park behind the old single-room cinema,
and walk up the alley to our favorite coffee shop.

The alley was littered
with pregnancy tests and syringes.

Once, I met a tweaker there who told me
he wouldn’t allow his daughter’s boyfriend
in his home because he was black.

A few blocks from the coffee shop
was an abandoned trellis where

Misty and I often went
to smoke cigarettes and weed.

I went there by myself once
and was chased away by a homeless man.
In retrospect he probably wasn’t homeless,
he was probably just strung out and trying to score.

I was nineteen the first time I *saw* meth—
My boyfriend’s step dad, Andrew, had to sell it

for his motorcycle gang but accidentally
got addicted to it. It was in a plastic bag
on the counter top and my boyfriend asked me:
“Do you know what that is?” I did.

Andrew left my boyfriend’s mom and married
a girl my age, got her addicted to meth,
forbade her from seeing her family,
and then beat her face in with a gun.

I heard about the story, but never knew
the girl’s name until the news broke
and the papers released her picture:
it was Misty. Her face was destroyed—
nose broken, two black eyes, lip split.

I tried to reach her at the hospital
but she wouldn’t return my calls.
I went to visit her but the nurse said
she was not accepting visitors.

I think about her often.

MacArthur Road, 2006

I was about eight years' old
and travelling down MacArthur Rd.
with my mother in her silver Mitsubishi.

On the left we passed
Pet's Supplies Plus and Radioshack;
on the right, Eyeland Optical and Sports Authority.

We took the exit
towards the Lehigh Valley Mall
where the amalgam

of department store perfumes
gave me a headache
and then a premonition:

This would be the same mall where,

about a decade later,
a woman would douse herself in gasoline
and light herself on fire.

Nate, the guard who tried to put-her-out,
picked up the part-time security gig to afford
Christmas presents for his children.

A year or so after,

there would be a shooting
at J. C. Penny's. My best friend's
mother would witness it.

At that moment, though, I was focused
on which stuffed animal I wanted
my mother to buy for me.

Indecision

I went through my contacts recently,
deleting old ones—

an ex's mom's cell phone number,
people from a group project three years ago,
old coworkers from TGI Fridays,
girls that were mean to me in middle school,

but I couldn't bring myself to delete
any dead kid's number—

not Ronnie, Kaitlyn, Sarah, Tom, or John...

and I couldn't figure out
what to do about Lizzy—

a few years ago, when Lizzy was in
eighth grade, she and her twenty-
five-year-old boyfriend murdered
her mother. She got thirty years
in prison but I'm not sure if that counts
as dead, or as alive but irrelevant;
if I should keep the number, or delete it.

Catholicism

Devotions for the Stations of the Cross

I. Jesus is Condemned to Death

and I kneel,
pressing my skinny knees
into the prie-dieux.

II. Jesus Carries his Cross

as I look around,
jealous that older folk
get to sit on the pew,
while I'm stuck kneeling.

III. Jesus Falls the First Time

meanwhile, the altar boys
shake their incense
filling the church with smoke.

IV. Jesus Meets his Mother

which prompts me to ponder
why my parents never go to church?
why do I only go when I'm at school?

V. Simon Helps Jesus to Carry his Cross

and my heart begins to beat
faster and faster;
I feel like it's choking me.

VI. Veronica Wipes the Face of Jesus

as I break into what I'd later learn
is called a "cold sweat."
My mouth tastes funny.

VII. Jesus Falls the Second Time

and my breath quickens.
I don't know how I know,

but I know my face is tinted green.

VIII. Jesus Meets the Women of Jerusalem

and I turn around
to tell the nun
that I'm not feeling okay.

IX. Jesus Falls the Third Time

and I feel it in my belly—
knots of yellow-green bile
twisting and churning,
begging to be expelled.

X. Jesus' Clothes Are Taken Away

as the nun grabs my hand,
and escorts me down the aisle
into the vestibule
where the older kids give confession.

XI. Jesus is Nailed to the Cross

in the church behind me
but I need outside air,
the kind that has oxygen,
and is not thick with incense.

XII. Jesus Dies on the Cross

meanwhile I cry,
because I was not prepared
for the guilt and shame I'd experience
reenacting Christ's crucifixion.

Holy Communion

I was given clear instructions—
“Walk down the aisle with your fingers clasped.

Upon reaching Father Michael,
curl your left hand in your right palm.

When he says ‘The Body of Christ,’
reply ‘Amen,’ then chew and swallow.

Next, take the cup, but do not sip;
simply let the wine brush your lip
then lick it off.”

I did not listen—

I let the wafer sit
on my tongue as long as possible
to see how much time it took
for Jesus to dissolve.

I didn’t let the wine touch my lip
so I could keep Him there longer.

There Was a Terrible Virus that Year

so they told us not to cross
ourselves with Holy Water;
God would understand.

I dipped my fingertips in
anyway then tapped
my forehead, breastbone, shoulders...

The elderly woman behind me coughed
and then did the same, as did
the man walking in behind her.

The mass was interrupted
by coughing and hacking;
I was elated.

We sang the hymns and shook
each other's bare hands—
"Peace be with you."

We took communion and drank
from the same cup worshipping
together.

On the way out I pulled
a shot glass from my bag
and filled it up with Holy Water—

Then I gulped it down and felt
the Holy Spirit moving within me,
the virus building.

Absolution of the Dead

I was hungover at a local diner
being served by a woman
who must've been pretty before meth
when Cash called:
"My dad's dead."

The Mass that followed was an array
of darkish almost-dress clothes
because most 21 year olds
don't own funeral clothes;

Bob Dylan's "Forever Young"
(a favorite of Cash's dad's)
rang throughout the church
while Cash, for the second time,
carried a parent's casket.

At the cemetery, the sun baked
my scalp and shoulders,
and a man with a thick Irish accent
read prayers I couldn't make out,
so I thought about how

it seemed tasteless to offer blessings
at such a sad time;
it felt wrong to praise "god"
for making Cash an orphan.

My train of thought was broken
as I reached the front of the line.
I placed a yellow flower atop the casket
as we buried Cash's father
near, but not next to, his mother.

Confessional

Genuflect before entering the pew;
sit quietly and peel the edges
of your nailbed until they bleed.

As you walk down the aisle,
drop your eyes and fix them
on the snake-shaped squiggle
where your clasped fingers meet.

Enter and get on your knees.

Peer through the clover-shaped gaps
in the thin metal divider and notice
Father's dry lips, his yellowing teeth.

Touch your sweaty forehead,
sternum, left shoulder, right.

Begin—

“Bless me Father, for I have sinned. My last confession was...”

Confess your sins—

copying the social studies homework,
pretending to be sick to miss school,
starting a mean rumor about Jillian Blazofsky,
wanting to kill your mother.

Contrition—

“For these and all my other sins, I am heartily sorry.”

Penance—ten Hail Mary's.

Scuttle back to the pew to recite them:

“Hail Mary,
full of grace,
the LORD is with thee...”

Take a hot shower,
and scrub as you sob:

“Hail Mary, full of grace, the LORD is with thee...”

Later, sin remorselessly—
open the front door and let the family dog run into traffic;
fuck a married man twenty years your senior.

That guilt is Catholic, not yours.

Medicate it with benzos;
Exorcise it with rough sex.
Burn it with hot wax;
Suffocate it with smoke.

“HailMaryfullofgrace, theLORDiswiththee...”

Absolve yourself,
See if you can.

Maman

My Mother

I.

She was strange,
and I came from her;
therefore, I'm strange.

II.

At fifteen,
she fled to Paris
and slept on Jim Morrison's grave.

By nineteen, she was an addict,
and shortly after she gave birth to a child
she'd never intended to have.

Two years passed-
she took that child from the father
and moved them into a shitty apartment.

III.

Moving into that apartment
would become my earliest memory.
I liked the dog we sometimes had.

I liked the smell of his black velvet ears
and how his square head tilted when he was focused.
I would spend hours running through leaf piles with him.

IV.

A year passed
and she began to regret taking me with her.
She'd sometimes lock me in rooms,

but sometimes she played with me.
She liked feeding me dinosaur-shaped chicken nuggets
and teaching me how to read.

Sometimes, when she felt stable,

she'd call my father
and offer to take the dog she'd left with him.

(She'd always inevitably end up having to give the dog back).

V.

I haven't seen her in almost a decade,
but my idiosyncrasies are proof
that a piece of her resides within me:

my anger towards men,
my rage at authority,
are hers.

VI.

I don't remember a lot, but I do remember car trips—
rubbing my fingers over the ribbed polyester upholstery
in the back seat of her Mitsubishi Mirage

while Jim Morrison sang
“When You're Strange.”

French

I have always hated French.

My maman was fluent—
tried to raise me bilingual

but even as a toddler
I refused to listen:

I screamed and covered my ears;
I wanted nothing to do with it.

Now, as an adult, whenever
I hear French I think of her.

Although I do not know the words, I notice
each syllable as they rip through my ears.

In my dreams she is mentally and physically
sicker than she ever was before.

She says “je t'aime, tu m'as manquée”
and I spit: then why did you leave?

“Je n'étais pas bien, j'étais malade”
Selfishness is not sickness,

Tu n'est pas pardonnée.

I wonder if these dreams mean
that somewhere, she is getting sicker

or if she is simply slipping,
fading from my memory in face, in voice.

Moon Poem

I am trying to write my moon poem
but every time I try to print the word
“*m o o n*” it comes out as “*m o t h e r*”

perhaps because I’m seeing more
of her in myself as I age: the shape
of my face when my hair is pulled back,
or when I drink too much, my anger...

I used to pray to the moon to bring
my mother back to me, but I learned
the moon only brings back the tide.

I need a worse god, a god of drugs
and alcohol, of epileptic seizures and
children left to fend for themselves,
of chaos.

I need a strange god able to conjure
the strange woman who prayed to her
monthly moon, begging it to bless her
scarred uterus with a child—

only to decide, after I was born,
that she did not want to be a mother.
I have prayed to many gods:

Dionysus, Jim Morrison, the junkie who
sat outside the Wawa in Camden,
the reliable ocean tides,
but none of them can bring her back.

Death & Ghosts

Plants

I stopped watering the plants
after we broke up—

I wanted *everything* to die.

A few months have passed
and I no longer want to die
but the plants' roots are ruined.

I water the pots
twice a week, observing
remnants of green
recede further and further
because I cannot bring myself
to throw them out.

This makes me anxious.

Travis

I drank radium for eighteen months—
put it in my tea before bed (delicious)
sprinkled the glowing specks under my pillow to fall asleep...

During those months
I willed my body to accept the poison,
convinced myself that it was “good” for me.

Over time,
I watched my bones grow weak
then felt betrayed as they broke.

During meals,
I’d pull out molars
then scold my mouth for its perfidy.

**

Those around me
saw my sickness for what it was—
a slow delightful toxicity.

But they could not persuade me
to abandon my sacred glowing powder—
in fact, I clung to it more tightly.

I painted myself pretty:
brushed it over my eyelids,
dusted it on my hollowed cheeks...

**

I loved that magic dust, that man.
I’d give anything to glow again,
to waste away with him in bed.

Child Suicide

It was cold,
but not cold enough to shiver;
when grief struck as a convulsion

I shook—
no matter how many people
placed their coat over my shoulders.

Our grandmother
complained of the rain
and mud on her good shoes

while you,
at only fourteen,
were being lowered into the ground.

I stared
for hours, awaiting
the rise and fall of the chest

or a twitch
as roses were dropped
into the casket,

but it was not until
the lid was closing
that I saw the corpse shiver.

Do children's
corpses' decay faster
or slower?

Grief lingers.
It dampens, but unlike a corpse
does not decay.

To Maria Elena Milagro de Hoyos

What did that deranged man do
with your eyes when he replaced them
with glass?

Did the wires and coat hangers hurt—
the ones he used to replace
your decaying tendons and ligaments?

Did the wig itch—
the one he made you
from your own shed hairs?

What about the paper tube
he used to pry open your sex—
was it dry and tight?

I am sorry that he took no care
to fix your makeup as you preferred
(lined lips, thinly arched brows)
after he replaced your melting skin
with silk and hot wax.

I am sorry that he bloated
your hourglass figure into
lumps of rags and cloths,

that after seven years
of abuse and rape
he made you *dance* with him.

I am sure your strong legs
once danced brilliantly—

but in his living room,
all he could do was sway
your slumped, amorphous form
back and forth.

After the medical examiner probed
your innards, ogled
over that man's preservation techniques,
you were put on display so everyone
could mock the "corpse bride."

I Will Burn You Back, I Will Burn You Through

I just saw your ghost—

same voice:

sweet giggle, “fuckin’” thrown in between every other word

same attitude:

defiant, rebellious

same habits:

play girls, smoke weed, skip school

same smile:

with your too-big-front-teeth.

For the first time in five years I could *see* you.

But as I reach out to touch you,
your features begin to melt away—

the eyes are wrong:

they are green instead of brown

and the build is wrong:

he is too thin

the complexion is wrong:

his skin is much clearer than yours was

and the ears are wrong:

his aren't stretched by ¼” tapers.

So I screamed “FUCK”
and hot salt filled my eyes
as I punched the dashboard
and the boy sitting next to me
asked “What’s wrong?”
but I stare at him blankly
because how could I answer him?

How could I tell him
he will *never* be his older brother;
as close as he gets
he will *never* be you.

At a Stop and Shop in North Haven, CT

I saw ghosts I have never met
wander through greying aisles;
their fingers browsed colorful
cardboard boxes of macaroni
and jars of artichoke hearts.

A five-foot-tall robot
with insulting plastic eyes
patrolled the store, painfully
bumping into every display—
too stupid to deserve
the autonomy afforded to it.

It reminded me of a supermarket
in Flemington, New Jersey where I spent
my first Christmas without my mother crying
because she was not coming back,

and earlier,
of a trip to a department store
in central Pennsylvania where
I swore I saw my dead grandmother
rifling through her purse for change
in the checkout line, the patrons
behind her growing impatient.

Suddenly that stupid robot
hit my foot and I was back—

in North Haven, panicking,
because I was peering into a realm
that I did not belong to:

intrusive, like a peeping Tom,
I was seeing strange ghosts
that were not mine to see.

I Met your Dead Mother Last Night; She Was Lovely

I met a new ghost recently:
your deceased mother.

Although she passed before
I could meet her in this life,
I recognized her from photos
and a familial resemblance.
She was petite and bore a smile
I've seen across your face.

She looked healthier than she did
in those later photographs
and she immediately recognized me—
you had told her about me,
you two spoke frequently, she was happy
to finally meet me in person.

But when she reached out to touch
my knee (lovingly, motheringly)
I became afraid—she was not “lifelike”
she *was* alive in this strange realm
that was not death... not life...
but something *else*.

If she could touch me
then we were existing
on the same plane

so I recoiled.

Epilogue

for Maddie Burpee

State-Dependent Memory

I'm remembering her from the corner of house parties
when I'm slippery and a "Maddie song" comes on.

She's in my head like polaroid pictures
viewed through the wrong prescription lens:

foggy, angel-headed girl with glitter eyes.
She's giggling and sipping on bubbly,

her pretty fingers twirling and teasing a joint.
Sometimes I'd give anything to go back there—

but eventually I sober up and remember
that this place was making her sick.

It filled her golden crown with the black
goo of melancholy, booze, and Xans,

left her to be chewed by the black wolves.
I knew I had to let her go so she could pry

that goo from her head-and-belly-space,
and peel the sticky tar from her teeth and bones.

I feel sick too, and am half-empty without her,
but once I'm done with this poisonous place,

I will build a warm and fulfilling life with her.

Queen Village, South Philadelphia

The apartment has hardwood floors and will be decorated with plants atop milk crates, a baroque yellow chair, and hundreds of books.

I'll adopt a tortie cat and name her Kopi. We'll eat breakfast together every morning while I sip Medaglia D'oro and apply to jobs.

I'll find a café in which to write, filling my Moleskin with poems, and dive bars where whiskey-sour-men will buy me cheap drinks.

Sooner or later I'll find another overconfident brunet man to sleep with, but I'll keep it casual because I won't *need* him.

My Friday evenings will involve big glasses of red wine, rom-coms, and Maddie playing with my hair while my head sloppily rests in her lap.

Saturday mornings she'll wake me up to vegan brunch and bottomless mimosas.

Things will be good; I will be happy.