

ABSTRACT

Lancer

Heather A. Bayless

Director: Chloe Honum, Ph.D.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines poetic license as “the freedom to depart from the facts of a matter or from the conventional rules of language when speaking or writing in order to create an effect.” This definition leaves out the role of a poem to speak the truth: poetic license allows this Truth to be told without need for factual truth. Whatever the direct or imagined experiences may be, it is my goal that the reader finds an emotional truth within the poems and stirring of thoughts from the collection as a whole. I do not mean for the reader to be satisfied: the resolution of many of the poems will make this evident. Within my own writing I have been influenced most noticeably by Marie Howe’s use of the direct address, Sylvia Plath’s signature caustic wit, and lastly I was inspired by Analicia Sotelo’s ability to write about virginity as a language rather than a static state of being. I hope to have taken this farther by writing about it as an experience, and as a constant questioning of self. Where there is rigidity, I hope the reader as well finds specificity. Where there is disorder and seemingly random associations, I hope the reader will find subtlety and intentionality.

APPROVED BY DIRECTOR OF HONORS THESIS:

Dr. Chloe Honum, Department of English

APPROVED BY THE HONORS PROGRAM:

Dr. Elizabeth Corey, Director

DATE: _____

LANCER

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
Baylor University
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Honors Program

By
Heather A. Bayless

Waco, Texas

March 2019

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Empty-handed.	1
Fraught.	2
12th and Wood	3
Kind of Guy .	4
Divine Hiddenness .	5
The Curse .	6
Mother Figure .	7
P.I. Suspects .	8
Yeah, Fluent.	9
Blackberry Picking .	10
Hesitation .	11
The Diagnosis .	12
Cutting.	13
Cutting Onions .	14
The 1 st Rule of Hell is Do What You Want.	15
Borderline .	16
Pariah .	18
Direct Address .	19
Divorce .	20
Test Tube Baby .	21
Child Support .	22
To Pawpa .	23
Fibromuscular Dysplasia .	24

Finding God	25
Throwing	26
Whole	27
Father I am Sorry	28
Heading North	29
A Certain Pastor Gives Marriage Advice	30
Porn Stars	31
This is Competition	32
Moving Out	33
Dependent	34
After the Funeral	35
God’s Laundry	36
Lancer.	37
Bibliography	38

EMPTY-HANDED

Fraught

There is something wrong,
wrong terribly wrong.
A poison in the air that sours
the stomach and I am the only one
who smells it. Maybe I'm the only one
it can poison, the way it tells me
I am with the wrong crowd and reading
the wrong books and not reading them
right. It tells me I am missing missing
missing something and it's out there,
past the bedsheets and stale air the
floor heater puts out in this empty house
the sun has stared through with too hot eyes
for too long. I am overdrawn. Everything has
a life outside of me and I am sick to know it.

12th and Wood

it was like that, with your wet mouth
kept drugged-up and spaced-out so that
when you called me you spoke in streams,
when I arrived you were fresh-flushed from the toilet
you threw up in. on the way home you promised a
flood of kisses, a shower of praise and compliments
I did not want. did I want your money? did I want your
sloppy touch, your alcohol, your Adderall? I hope the
way that I dragged you out of my car, tossed you in bed,
locked you in, threatened “stay here or I’ll tell
the police where you keep your weed,” proceeded to pour
your Jameson down the drain then locked your front door
because you never do shows you that I just want to get you
home safe, I just want to get you dry.

Kind of Guy

Constant headache, your presence
likes to rub elbows and jab ribs with them
too. Slide in and tell me you like “business.”
Blue-eyed cool, buzz with every notification vibration.
Pawn your “promise” ring, cut corners and losses.
You won’t smile for a photo. Tender under belly,
You sewer rat I’d know your grease anywhere.

Divine Hiddenness

Dear Lord Jesus,
I'd like to send you sequins
- could you send your address?
For now I've stuck them here with
Pins to the far end of my mattress.

Attach them to your robes
So that you are better seen,
So that when you come to see me
I will know you by your sheen.

I don't want you to be confused,
So wear them as my directions instruct.
Walk into my room with your calm
Holiness – divinity expected, never abrupt.

If you can't sparkle in arrival,
Maybe you could at least give a glow.
Be a smooth light in announcement
So when I see you it will be "Oh, *hello.*"

I've now put a candle under the sequins
- tell me, could you not see them?
Surly I did not scare you with the bit
Of summoning blood pricked from my thumb.

God, I suspect you've gone dumb,
Maybe you are playing peek-a-boo.
I fold my hands over my eyes, swing them
Wide to say "Peek-a-boo, when will I see you?"

I close them back to give you another chance,
Wait a beat then swing the palms wide.
There is no new light, the ceiling is uncracked,
Only unused glitter at my bedside.

The Curse

We women,
having first eaten, have
been starving ever since.
If our bellies protrude,
we will be unable to hold
food. When we cave in,
we will eat up
compliments.

Mother Figure

There is no going back from this.

Stretch-marked and bruised you have aged and he knows it.

Lemon scented hand soap in the kitchen and you don't smell any better.

Noxious with regret. Your back doesn't bend like you want it to,

it never has and honey it never will. Try too hard two times

a week. The rest? Powerless. Kids didn't help. So find a way

in subscription boxes and nice shirts paired with cheap socks.

Cuddle up with the Word out of context and sip a latte.

You will look back every day for the rest of your life.

You wanted out and all you got was empty.

P.I. Suspects

I thought it was funny that we were being followed.
Like we had our own entourage,
A conga line down the highway, into Brookshires,
Back out again. Who was following the man who followed us?
I did not know but it was all a riot until Mother twisted my
Head and said “see that man over there? He has been following
Us all week. Your father won’t go through the trouble of seeing you
So he sends someone else to do it for him.”

Yeah, Fluent

after Analicia Sotelo

The snubbed nose ends of
Box cars and pretty friends
Are both here to wreck you.
Weddings are generally hell,
Mine will be no exception.
The hook of my own jaw will
Smile. If his skeleton knocks
On the headboard at least he
Knocks at all. At least you're
Not knocked up. You should
Fear the smiles of the friends:
They must be hiding something,
Watching your back and saying
Nothing. It is fine to entwine but
First you need permission divine -
Yeah, yeah, then on your knees.
I will pass the wisdom to you
That my mother first taught
To me: you can keep him from
Running if you hide the keys.

Blackberry Picking

"I see," she said at last, thoughtfully. "I see now. This garden is like the Stable. It is far bigger inside than it was outside."

"Of course, Daughter of Eve," said the Faun. "The further up and the further in you go, the bigger everything gets."

C. S. Lewis, *The Last Battle*

Done shoeless of course,
Like so many of life's best pleasures.
Knew where the burs grew,
The grass' own bald spots.
Mom's shadow shielded fair freckled
Skin, newly scarred red from an
Over-eagerness and an ignorance of thorns.
Now wearing gardening gloves, skin salved,
Reaching further down and further in
Where birds had not been.
They were not for tasting, just to go from stained gloves
To bucket to canning. Next year's jam.
Mother would pop one right into her
Mouth, smile the smile she passed down,
Seeds in her teeth.

Hesitation

Life I have loved you long distance for too long:
I would not know you in my bed.

You would approach it and I would startle.
You would lift up a blanket or two and I
would shrink back from you.

If you were to lay,
outstretch your arms to me, chest bare,
teeth exposed,
I'm afraid I would cry.
You are too beautiful to want me. Surly you
cannot, you cannot.

Life you have been *out there*.
You smell.

Were they pretty, the other people? Did they have fun drinks and smile at you like I know
they would you absolute charmer, you dream boy.

I have wanted you. I called out your name and
You did not come, though through no fault of your own.
But you are here, and why can I not have you? I read about
You in grocery-store checkout aisle magazines – this is
how you do it, right?

No, this is not a bed this is Bedlam.

Who does the having here? I have desired you, I have craved you in most wicked ways.
I might have you flayed. If I were
to welcome you, to learn what do with you, and settled...

If all those people with mixed drinks crowded at the door, and
grubby-fingered kids stuck Skittles under the doorframe, would you still know me?
Would you stay here beside me, despite the cold, despite the stale pillows?
Would you sing a song with just my name?

The Diagnosis

I would write about how a good shit feels successful, that I love to be empty but then I would get sad and remember how I used to eat so little that I never shit, I got shit-sick, had to take me out of school, lock me in a bathroom till I could pass a stool. Hot water and laxatives and the shut-down bowels gave a shudder. A week's worth of bits and crumbs, the indulgence of one whole tablespoon of peanut butter all out. Pain at the porcelain, I smile now but I was crying then. Made me eat thick soup, made me not thin.

CUTTING

Cutting Onions

Pinched the plush of my ring finger –
heady stuff, being able to see through
me the seconds before the blood
realizes its loose. Run wild, you.
The tough chicken sits unperturbed
in the pot. It is like that sometimes,
the awe before the gore, the rest
uncaring. There was a calm in the
storeroom before the ceiling fell through,
years of unseen water damage and pests. It
was a slip that preceded the bleeding. Like water,
like knife. Mother lost her first wedding dress.

The 1st Rule of Hell is Do What You Want

The virgin knows this but has ankles as thin
as wrists and vulnerable like a mouth when
he stoops to kiss them. Skinned as teeth the
halfwit, white-tick touch collapses. The shock
of the shaft, a broken rib being bent back in
place. At the altar, a tongue bit through with
hesitation. Parents nod: their divorce is to blame.
At dawn they take up an offering and at dusk,
the same. He lifts the cloth with inevitable froth:
he wants the bronze in her lungs. The virgin
cannot say yes. Her mouth is full of blood.

Borderline

for the lives lost and nearly lost at the

Borderline Bar & Grill shooting, Nov. 7, 2018

But I know her – would have been
leading the dance, lights flashing as with
one hand she'd have shown her friend the steps.
“No, Alaina,” a full-throated laugh, “that’s not how
you do it.” Sassy hips, blonde-hair flip she would
have danced the lead, she would have been the last
one on the ground, would have covered someone
else when the gun sounded. She does not agree
with oxygen mask policies, “If not me, then who?”

But
she spent the night sleeping, curled up
on the couch of an off-campus friend while
they watched Blackkkkllansman and exchanged
soft skin in cuddles because they missed their
boyfriends. She woke up and didn't have practice
this morning. Vibrant and still full of blood, she
didn't go out dancing because she left her boots
back in Texas, the ugly ones we only bought because
they were half off. Crop-topped and leading, her RA
punched through a window for the girls to escape
through smoke smog and screams, now
she's in so many stiches it hurts to wear
sleeves. Freshmen and still alive,
by a flesh-thin borderline still nineteen
and I'm back here comparing Cavender's to God,
knowing this poem was a pair of boots

away from a eulogy.

Pariah

She told me she'd rather lay her face
on a hot stove for 10 seconds than
to have ever met them.

“Them”

Scared her from leaving her apartment for a week.

“Them”

Drunk enough she could convince them they were in her.

“Them”

Walking quietly, calm and unnamed while

She

Was thrust in the public, shunned by family,
forced to barre a bloody bed sheet as the president of her sorority whispered

“it was a mistake to let you in.”

“Them”

Everyone else, because you never would, would you?

She told me she wants amnesia,
She wants a blank space, untainted.
She wants erasure to be well.
I want to watch them burn in Hell.

Direct Address

first line inspired by "Our God" by Chris Tomlin

If Your love is greater, and if Your love is stronger,

Why does singing out make the chest pain last longer?

If everyone else can worship sincerely, why do I raise my voice and feel bereft,

Raise my hands and feel faker yet?

Apparently Your love is an ocean in which I abound,

So I gather that my apathy is an eagerness to drown.

I know You love me, have me in Your hands, but I'm turning, still kicking

Begging you for once to let me try swimming.

Divorce

Half my blood

Is on the table and

Half my blood

Wants me to live with you and

Half my blood

Wants me to never see you again and

Half my blood

Threatened to leave me in a hospital and

Half my blood

Helped me count the ribs.

Half my blood

Beckons me to spread 'em and

Half my blood

Is signing me up for a convent and

Half my blood

Is not enough to stifle either side, you will

Have me all or have me drained.

Test Tube Baby

Contemptable conception
Born out of wedlock and
Without love, Hell's got a
Wider door for those with
Broken homes and petri
Dishes for wombs. Soon
The church will hand me a
Glass vile, measure my sin
From spit. An algorithm for
My damnation, I am creation,
Father-absent. Writhe as I
Rise, I am your miracle mocked,
And I am after your love, all the
Between-the-legs that I never was.

Child Support

This hook in the jaw
is really something.

Tilting back and
stumbling, exposing
neck for a kiss and
fumbling.

Align these eyes
(they are yours)
with the perfect
guy, then turn
my head to crack
my neck: behind me,
old maid Fate.

“We’re almost done
with her” over the
holiday plates
(they are yours)
hot with your food.
“One more semester
and the hook
comes out the jaw.”

Above the roast
the centerpiece is
an orthodontic mold
of my once-crooked
teeth and a diploma
(they are yours)
and all around you
sing “Remember,
remember?”

To Pawpa

I'm not just talking to you in my sleep anymore.

I asked you where the pencil sharpener was just last night, mentioned you to a broken water fountain, told it that you could have fixed it, you fixed just about everything. You owned so many cans of WD-40, we did not know what to do with all the grease you left behind. In the red belly of a robin I saw you – so contrary and so full. So full of worms. We knew what you did to Father though we said nothing and he said nothing. He does not take his shirt off when he swims. Your sorry blue eyes come to me when I see Fig Newtons, you always kept some on hand to force a smile from us. The sharpener is not in your desk. Father gave everything away but your ties and WD-40, asking “What do we do with all this grease?”

Fibromuscular Dysplasia

Mother I am afraid to hold you -
what glass are you hiding? Two more
pearl-strings twisted in knots around your
kidneys are not what you needed.

I am standing in your mother's kitchen spooning fried chicken into cooled
gravy and I do not taste a thing. An apt metaphor for porn:
you can consume it but I wouldn't call it a meal.

Love is

you saving up your Brookshires points
to get me a saucepan you thought I might need.
I don't need it.

Farberware in hand, you line up three generations
to share the news. I am trying to not notice your tears.
I notice that we all have the same sized breasts instead.

Nonnie shakes her head. I'm staring at your abdomen.
In this kitchen a younger you used to peel off burnt
summer skin, your mother would salve it. I imagine
peeling you back, taking out the veins that kink and cord.

I have forgotten that I've gone blackberry picking,
that you taught me to skin a fish.

And now you are making me
drink a tart tea that's good for my immune system.
This will not help.

I just want to cry to you, tell you
Mom everything is wrong,
another loved one is getting divorced,
I'm applying to jobs I don't want,
I don't love the man I have,
you have a liver cyst and another aneurism
on each kidney. We joke and say they are your
babies. You're growing twins. We want them dead.

Finding God

I thought of God in big terms and big words,
Spoke of God with a white smile and strong verbs.
Said you could have God when you needed him most but
Ended up painting God as a holiday host and
I'm not saying God isn't warm and cozy but
This characterization comes with a bit of nosy-
Ness. Sneaking through cabinets and tipping on toes I
Thought I could catch him with half-used toilet paper rolls
Hidden in drawers – he's trying to impress me.
Best foot forward so that he can possess me.
If the roles were reversed God would sneak through
My medicine cabinet, under my sink, check in the fridge
For milk that expired last week. All while I'm giving the blessing.
We both know I'm not actually praying to him but the
Picture of an uncle that isn't even mine, that he
Took as a casualty. God has been found out.
He is playing hide-and-seek. I'm on my hands and knees
In front of the Christmas party, looking under the table cloth.
Come out, God. You don't scare me.

THROWING

Whole

Oh

I want

it all,

and I won't stop there.

Finally, when I have his head titled back,

not just ready but willing,

he will open his mouth

to flowers.

The shock will be to see

if he chokes or if he breathes.

Father I am Sorry

Father I am sorry I disappoint you.

For such high brows you have low standards

That still I cannot meet. I missed the maker's mark

And the all-in-a-row front teeth. Brace-Face, you called me,

But I didn't mind because at least you called me. Happy to

Be recognized, knowing what was I in comparison to

Tall drinks and business prospects, Playboy and your

P.I. suspects. You were the first man I was down on my knees for,

Throwing up nightly, "young girls should be sprightly." Until

You scolded me with your sorrow, a slight frown and

"I'm worried about you."

I'm worried about you.

Big-busted girls on your mind, a gold necklace,

You swing and smoke on vacation with the

Same mouth you gave me.

Daddy, Daddy,

I will love you 'till I die.

I will ask for you first at the gate.

Heading North

I threw up on the side of I-35, just
Crawled right over the passenger seat, opened the door,
And greeted the grass with my gastronomy. Some
Man's cows looked at me.

I shouldn't be reading texts while going 80 but
I do and I did and it said
"He didn't make it."
What a wide expanse, all this

Green, all this concrete. On the other side is a
Pond, burnt to a crisp. A truck honks at my backside.
I taste bile and the highway rolls on, steady stream
Of sex-slavery and grief.

He died
Knowing that I never speed.

A Certain Pastor Gives Marriage Advice

No.

I am throwing you out.

You have muddy shoes and you expect we
will lose the love we have worked for, that I will not win the one
I want so much I went blind, you say true love is bathtub gin.
I wager that your home smells like cheap air freshener.

I am crab-crawling away, good bye, good luck
with your podcasts and your cheesy books telling me
God is what keeps this marriage afloat.
So much God! So much marital hope!
Every marriage needs repairs but it is a good boat!

Get out
of that relationship it will eat you alive and when it is done it will
turn you into cold soup in the fridge, lots of garlic,

good for the kids.

Porn Stars

Do you have your favorites, and may
I know their names? They must be doing
a good job, keeping you from the real thing.

They show up on screen, chest bare at
your command and it's all the devil's
fault. He's tempting you, poor thing.

But I walk into a room alone with you and
I am too much. I am clothed: Temptress
in a Tank-Top, I would bring in the big bucks

If I wasn't being so stupid, letting you in every
time with a hundred unnamed women between
your legs when you won't even let me touch your

thighs. And yet you will come over, smile, say my
name and I will melt like a girl, wet between the legs,
virgin-virgin all over.

This is Competition

I have loved three women in my life:

One of which is myself,

None of which are my mother.

The first one was like me but better,

She did math in her head, was better read

And was popular with the boys I liked.

The second one was like me but better

Than the first, she spoke words that echoed

And had me laughing 'till it hurt. The third

Is self-declared, uninteresting and painfully

Aware that I want to love a woman who is like

Me but better and that I have made love to men

Only so I can forget her.

Moving Out

If they put grates over the street drains where will
the cats live? Will they circle around, smell my
milk, slink to our house, and curl up beside
us Dear? I picture you here, just so. Arms
outstretched, chest bare, teeth exposed.

You know the mood I am thinking:

Why don't we live together yet?

Why don't the cats stay in the

woods? Who will live with

whom? Two virgins walk

into a room with

a bed – the rest

is a joke, aren't

I funny? Ha-

ha ha-ha

have me.

Dependent

I have felt such a feeling,
Where existing was all that could be mustered,
My own heart's cadence a defiance against myself I
Longed to feel the cool of quiet silence.
But once in the big campus corridor,
And many times since,
I felt I exist.
Not a resignation to the fact but
A broad boast, my heart's toast to
The air around me and the crick in my neck.
I exist, I persist, I am extra natural. Don't
You want to feel me through the rip in my
Jeans, even as cold as your finger tips are?

After the Funeral

The last God-fearing place open
Past 12 am, we went to Whataburger
After I let you kiss me raw, neck and hands
And thighs. Now we're fries and shakes
Deep into being the only ones here. Still tasting
The salt of your tears I buy you a burger. Your
Slumped spine is poking through your shirt.

Is this how Uncle Mike died? Heart attack from
A late-night cheese burger when he was 21
with not a small but a large shake. It is the curse
To be one reckless youth away from middle age.
Everyone grieves differently so I do not mind when
We play footsies, do not recoil when your chilled
Hand slides under my shirt I know you'll miss him.

God's Laundry

God is air drying his clothes.

The southwest is smelling wonderful.

Whitety-tighties snapping in the breeze

He stands on his porch, hands on his birthing hips.

He overlooks on to you naked. You are plucking your eyebrows. He approves.

He walks back inside to make coffee. He composts the grounds in the Mediterranean. He sits on the porch to watch you dress.

God's got a big day, watching you, waiting for his robes to dry, waiting for you to call.

Lancer

When I imagine a life without you
I imagine being mildly hungry for the rest
Of my life. I'm wandering around
 waif thin. It's not
Because I don't eat, I'm just
Hungry. I don't have a name for what.
I wipe the back of my mouth.

 It's grease.

In this other life I am picking up pennies off of the side
Of I-35, the traffic driving at me made up completely
Of my car in all the same color. It's a black Lancer.
They swoop past me, speeding as I bend. Throwing
Me off balance, I don't pay attention to
 heads or tails, only
That my hands are oddly warm.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Akbar, Kaveh. *Calling a Wolf a Wolf*. Alice James Books, 2017.
- Bell, Marvin. *Iris of Creation*. Copper Conyon Press, 1990.
- Brooks, Gwendolyn. *Selected Poems*. Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2006.
- Bukowski, Charles. *What matters most is how well you walk through the fire*. Black Sparrow Press, 2000.
- Change, Jennifer. *Some Say the Lark*. Alice James Books, 2017.
- Glück, Louise. *Firstborn*. Anvil Press Poetry, 1969.
- Howe, Marie. *Magdalene*. W. W. Norton & Company, 2017.
- L'Engle, Madeleine. *A Circle of Quiet*. HarperOne, 1984.
- Limón, Ada. *Bright Dead Things*. Milkweed Editions, 2015.
- Muldoon, Paul. *Maggot*. Parrar, Strause and Giroux, 2010.
- O'Hara, Frank. *Lunch Poems*. City Lights Books, 1974.
- Plath, Sylvia. *Ariel*. Harper Perennial, 1956.
- Sotelo, Analicia. *Virgin*. Milkweed Editions, 2018.
- Siken, Richard. *Crush*. Yale University Press, 2005.