

A woman with curly hair is shown from the chest up, looking down at a large, crumpled piece of yellow paper she is holding. The background is a soft, out-of-focus light color.

Paper Cuts:

Poems for the Bruised

a chapbook
By Anna Cates
Scars Publications
2003

Table of Contents

Battery Man.....3
The House the Beast Built..... 5
The Fallen Ones.....6
Coney Isle7
The Open Door.....8
Jesus Jones.....9
The Bully.....11
Tightrope.....12
Getaway14
The Flatulence Papers.....15
Social Theory17
The Darkroom.....18
The Man Who Loves Pain19
Rituals.....20
Wonderland21
Tarzan,23
The Fall.....44
Snow White’s Step Mother (A Mad Woman’s Lullabye).....25
Strange Mythology.....26
The Civilian.....27
Battlefield.....28
Training Rhesus Monkeys29
Kingdom Beneath the Sky.....30

Battery Man

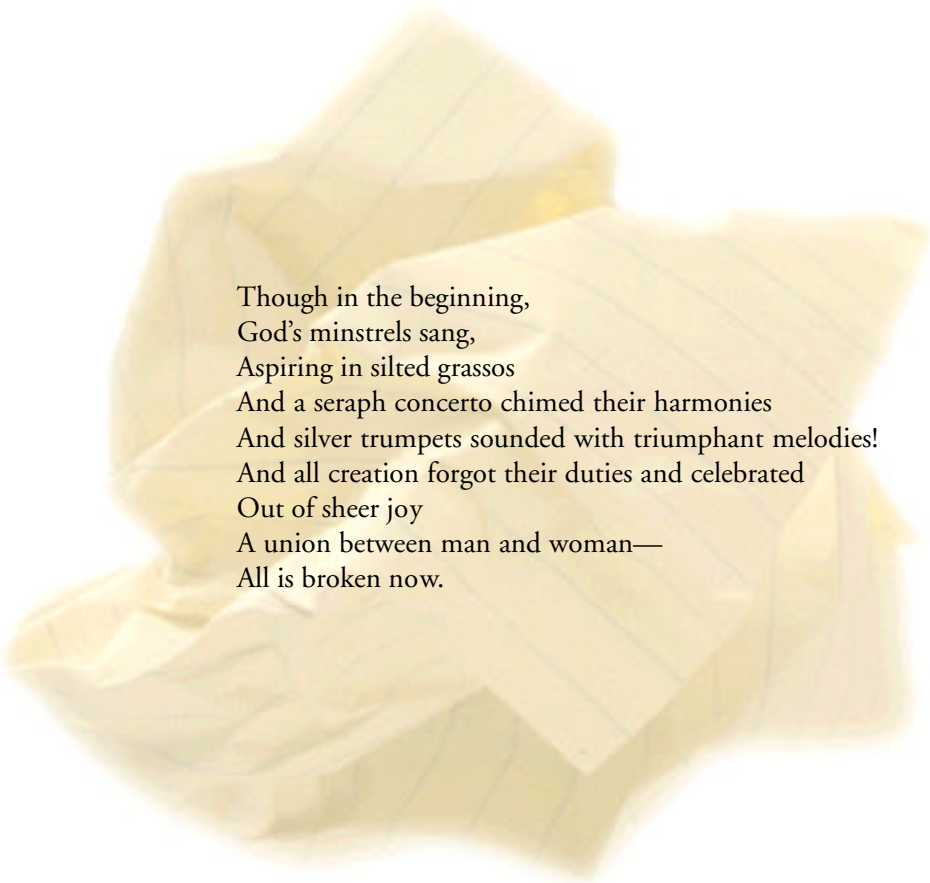
Broken homes,
Broken bones,
Broken lovers,
Once brimming with sincerity,
Broken now and bloody.

Some days black and blue eyes spot the town—
Bruised arms, backs, and thighs.
Tears ooze like cactus juice
Through the wounds and pleas.
For neither did her sighs nor the girly neon sign
escaped you.

Though innocent smiles brighten the lows—
Patched-up children in patched-up clothes—
Their teething gums and teasing tongues
Just seem to froth up indifference, don't they—
Spaghetti or hamburgers but who cares either way—
After all the re-heated left-overs and TV reruns—
Your mind's a wilted weed,
You're no Sugar Daddy,
And the family's left town,
Opting for a better man.

And now the horizon seems so strangely silent,
For Love took its last breath long ago
And lies like a carcass in the desert.

So let the Angels regret that you were born,
For just like Lucifer, hurled
From Heaven like a fallen star,
You have lost your place in glory!



Though in the beginning,
God's minstrels sang,
Aspiring in silted grassos
And a seraph concerto chimed their harmonies
And silver trumpets sounded with triumphant melodies!
And all creation forgot their duties and celebrated
Out of sheer joy
A union between man and woman—
All is broken now.

The House the Beast Built

The madwoman's locked in the cathedral,
But she is no longer tied to the bed,
But protrudes like a gargoyle at the window
And wishes that she were dead.

Crocodiles swirl in the channels
Like the voices invading her mind.
The steeple has severed and toppled,
But the farmer has fed his swine.

Demons dance in the attic
As the fever flickers like fire
Consuming her sleep and soul
And tearing her heart like a briar.

The marriage bed is barren.
Its posts stick up like horns.
The sheets are torn and twisted
And her dreams dried up like corn.

She lives and breathes so brokenly
In this house the Beast has built.
But she cannot be reborn,
Only subside and wilt.

The Fallen ones

The end--
The street of streets--
Car engines lumber by like thunder
And the women hobble along in high heeled stilts
As laughter rolls through broken or golden teeth
And lust clutches somebody's fallen lover.
But why ask, "Why are you walking the streets?"
Or, "Don't you believe in the eyes of Heaven?"
Painted women will always read their poetry.
Listen to what they say:

Let us help you reach the grave—
You will spill like autumn leaves
And melt like morning dew.
You won't just go into hiding--
You will plunge like a star in the solemn rain
Within a great and towering sky.
You will discover death
As the old folks do,
Dropping to the floor one morning with a rasp--
You will discover death
As the unfaithful lovers do,
Crashing down upon the bed one evening in a blast--
You will discover death
As the mountain goats do,
Descending the rocky crags beside the monastery
And trampling down upon pastures
Laden with their own excrement and cremation's ash,
Sprinkled from goblets by priests when the air is still
And the sun is setting behind another funeral procession.
They raise their goatees
And pause for just one second in morbid fascination--
Realizing they've been eating it!

Coney Isle

Strawberry delicious lipstick meshes with your desire—
Almonds and cream coat your marinated jowls—
Honeymooners and doves appear off Coney Isle,
Where rule-the-roost pirates once capsized
Sea-sloppy sailors and sycophants.

Did corsets and petticoats mean to protect the damsels
From the ruin of such octopi?
Tearing apart underskirts,
Those blood-stained wolves plundered and ravished
With a Moorish “aye-aye”
As whips lashed and revolvers flashed
In the fustiness of brusque.
As elegant as ammonia,
Those ruffians pillaged pilots
And left maidens as soft as fresh-baked bread
As desolate as hydras!

But today a marine just whistles,
Glancing at the damsel
Who seems so lonely there.

The Open Door

In summer farmers hoe turnips and radishes.
Blackberries fatten then decay.
But she finds the bush limbs bare
When she parts the icy tentacles,
Bordering the forest.

Beware when the wolf becomes friendly
And moose cross the brink with foaming mouths
And demons ascend the stair.

The farm house has ceilings with holes.
In the cellar red eyes glow.
A woman curls into a ball
And demons creep up the wall.

Demons can rise from the stink.
Demons can look you through
Demons can eat an orange whole.

Reality sinks in like a thousand needles,
Twisting muscle.
The baby's cheeks are red with blood.
Her fingers stiffen with the chill.
Mother holds the bundle to her breast
And follows the shadows across the snow.
And a demon hunches his back like a boulder
And bolts through the open door.

Pink blankets in a crib mold in the cellar,
Far away from sight.
And demons with dripping mouths
Linger in the chill.

Jesus Jones

I read a tale of Chinese brothers.
One held his breath for hours.
One turned his neck into a column of steel.
One swallowed the sea to escape the pain . . .

Jesus Jones, clairvoyant,
Presses his nose against the screen.
He can hear it through the walls.
He sputters and fizzes, his face reddens,
And today's Tom Sawyer screams:
"You always tell me things I already know!"
Jesus never stomped upstairs.
Jesus never wanted a crown.
Jesus never threw himself upon his sword.
He knew that girls were raped
And never refused to heal.
Just touching his robe stopped the issue of blood.
Jesus always took his turn.
He walked on the water and didn't sink.

But every night there's another bone.
The toilet water turns pink.
Reams of torn wall paper hang in the air.

When Jesus walked the Earth
Did he share the mind of God?
Did he know that the Star Trek posters
Would be rent from the wall?
Did he know when it would start?
Did he know that she would touch
The blanket to her face
When someone broke her little pin cushion heart?
Did he know that the eyes would collect
Themselves in single file

Along the crack of the closet door—
That the bones would compose themselves
In skeletal form?

Jesus Jones, fully human,
Sits on the pew,
Collar buttoned at the Adam's apple,
Shoes pressed together at the heal.
The speaker knows his thoughts.
He reads it in the bones.
He sings a funny tune.
Prayer spurts from his mouth.
But though he packs his ears with wax,
Chew his own heart,
And sits on his hands for hours,
Pain invades a sheltered world,
Bolts fly through the air like bullets
And the skeletons cross their skinny thighs,
Wishing for the break.

Blood covers everything.
Jesus Jones is sinking in it.
It passes his chin,
And he drowns.

The Bully

Muddled secrets—

Beaten yellow-black eyes shine like empty craters.

A cracked face buries itself into palms—

Make-up, grafted on like new vegetation, cakes together
behind light brown hair, once full now torn.

Yes, the man of the house is all thumbs

And wears his pair of black leather gloves,

As if to hide his fingerprints

Or pamper his heavy hands.

The creaking floor boards are battered and muddy—

The Scrabble game hurled against the wall.

French bread firms and stales

As the dishes are scraped, scrubbed, or broken.

Now the stolen lamp makes pale his scowl

As his woman cries at how she sheepishly tried him

But worked like sand to keep him warm and familiar

And to find some redemption in the cracked wall paper

And in a silent outlaw's sullen whispers.

Again her solemn eyes face his numb stare.

She rubs his hand like a lucky copper coin,

Though she's wasted shallow laughter

And learned his foolish desire

Lay only in his stomach and his loins

It's too late now to just fool around.

The night is falling down.

They do not realize what they've done.

The cat has been fixed.

She shrinks up like a raisin in her basket

And refuses to touch her only kitten.

Tightrope

How green seems the world
With interplanetary jealousy.
How barren lies the sky
Above the Earth's hot cradle.
How secretly the moon rises
But floats forever lonely.
How desperately the stars swirl
Without the astronomer's focus.

But I am shimmering in love
Above the mashers who grin devilishly—
Like maddened dogs kept in cages
And poked with sticks then finally set free.

I inch across this tightrope
And head out toward my safety
And the little gold medal of victory,
Offered like a dog biscuit.

My tinsel halo hoops over my head
In a flimsy ring supported by wire.
Tin foil-covered cardboard angel wings,
The size of thunderbird's feathery expanse,
Loom along my back.
But I am stuck jiggling across this tightrope,
Like an astronaut in space,
Trebling toward some unknown and yet-discovered Love,
Wondering, how did I get myself into this?
And why must I endure the bitter mockery
Of those that-lost-at-Love below me—
Beneath me in the crowds who recite their hasty elegies
Through the eons-chilled harp-songs
That mesh with the stadium's elliptical lighting till

Some dude cries, “Hey, when will this act come to an end?”
And another fellow hollers, “Why hasn’t that Angel fallen yet?”

Then, suddenly, my Dare-devil Darling—
Leaps onto the flying trapezes,
And joining my routine, just to appease me.
Further up in the stands
There radiates a sudden shift in harmony—
Angelic chants and acapella medleys—
Laughter like melody.

Getaway

At the coast
He had spied her,
Casting bread into water
As if so content without a grind.
He felt his hope subside
Down to the green sea
Like a gull with a bullet
In its side.

He found her so inviting—
French braid,
Strong as rope,
Nestling across her back
Like a garden snake—
Pure as crystal,
Slipping grapes between her lips
There, alone—
As if she'd found Paradise.
He simply had to follow her home.
Now,
Hours later,
She is nipped in the bud.
Her lipstick
Shines like a cherry.
She sleeps like a dove.
A tea kettle sings sweetly.
Blood seeps
Into the sofa
Afghan
While he swings
Down the fire escape,
As crafty as a dragon.

Outside, a cloud blots the blue,
Far,
Far above him.

Too,
Too bad
His Angel wouldn't love him.

The Flatulence Papers

The hourglass drips yesterday's fairy tale dreams
Into predictable tomorrows
As certainly as cracked eggs or broken, bloody monkey brains
Exude their ooze.

Burned-out bodies bob around
beside the assembly line under the lights,
radiating with dank glow—
Confused heads undream tomorrow.

Stubble armpits release a glow
Like leaky pens in the foreman's white shirt pocket.
A worn-out worker slops a mop across the floor.
Someone punches a card into a time clock,
Leaving a hole . . .
The countdown . . .
Though we speak in the tongues of Angels . . .

Silence is the devil's crumbs.

But the flatulence papers have been done—
No longer blank and empty as a ghost town.
The boss piddles around with his numbers and nouns,
Plinking across the keyboard as the computer hums.

Thirsty for epiphany?—
Thirsty as Atlantis ready for submerge
In sadly romantic apocalypse.

Somebody's smashed fingers fatten and swell—
Drool slides from a mouth in pain—
Slate cuts into someone's hand in occasional,
Unavoidable accident—

As water drips from a faucet
Like saliva down a chin and onto a soiled T-shirt.

But the jobs are no farce—promise tomorrow's sustenance—
Come like old, black resistance
Or become a refuge from poverty's bombs . . .

But have not Love . . .

The workers are in their places,
Driven down from their trailers to the factory this night.
The supervisor sits behind the glass window of his office.
He writes and talks on the phone.
He keeps a little basket of pens and clippers on his desk
And a pillow on his chair to make himself at home.
But he has had to speak to her again—
Though he is not a killer or a blood-letter, just the manager,
Falsifying data.

Anxiety collects and dispenses like clouds . . .
Somebody's not been spoken for . . .
She is nothing more than yesterday's unimportant papers.

Yesterday, crumbled up and wrinkly,
Misses the basket,
And hits the floor.

Social Theory

Begins something like this:
Only the strongest survive—
Only the smallest
Crust of the upper 1%—

Meaner than the paper-thin sliver of cake
Slanted onto Scarlet O’Hara’s china plate.

She pecked one crumb before lamenting,
“Oh I declare—I just can’t eat another bite!”

The rest of us are floating
In a river like a yellow-haired hound.
Cold currents beat against our steady dog paddle
Till we loose our upstream pace, floundering,
And burble down the flow,
Subsiding, submerging,
Helplessly, hopelessly downing.

Social theory
Ends something like this:
Water-logged,
We wash up the bank,
Under the deadened brambles
At the foot of the loneliest range
To furnish the soil our fertilizing mange.

Somebody leaves the darkroom
 On Orange-Black October,
 A worm wiggles over a corpse,
 And a doctor fingers through a birth canal,
 Melting the secret icicles of his pregnant nude.

Uncamouflaged scandals
 Are exposed in the dark room,
 Lamps radiate with fuzzy blue light
 And photos are hung up to dry.

Her shoulders seemed pinned down—
 Touched by the new moon—
 He tenses at the bluish-white caesarian scar
 Moves beyond the point
 But stops short of the mark.

The Darkroom

She arrived at the military base early
 As if to a diner party--
 Now the doctor's uncontrolled hands writhe
 Over his naked patient,
 Like a gothic organist,
 Pounding around on cobwebbed keys.

Street lights glow like the eyes of night
 Beyond the covered windows of the darkroom.
 A watery envelopment,
 A fresh side-shot,
 And a camera-ready end,
 Then the silent soldier slushes out,
 But cannot win.

Pregnancy's veteran:
 Malpractice hasn't stolen your heart.
 Pregnancy's veteran:
 Hush!—

This isn't Christmas Eve!

The Man Who Loves Pain

There's a man who loves pain.
His only flash of joy
Is destruction.
He strips the earth of trees
And pumps disease into the air.
He'll pluck out a baby's lullaby
Then splinter someone's bones
To show him just how sharp
He really is.

Imagine:
The man who loves pain gets his way—
Hot at the task,
A bead of sweat drops from his brow
Like a nuclear bomb.
If the world was ever a temple,
It's ruins now.

Imagine:
All is finished—
Everything beautiful is gone.
Only the man who loves pain remains.
He sits on a tree stump
With no one to hate or rape
And weeps.

Rituals

The sky lifts its skirt.
The moon drops his arms.
The stars are in charades.
The grass rustles.

“There will be blood for drink tonight
And bones for the vultures tomorrow,”
Bael chuckles.

Yellow eyes surround the campfire,
And Pan plays his pipes in the background.

How kind of him to bring her
Into the womb of nature.
It's not so cold.
The stars warm her like light bulbs,
And he is gentle,
Or that's what the crickets say
When the moonlight dims,
And the frost sets in,
And the wind bristles.

Wonderland

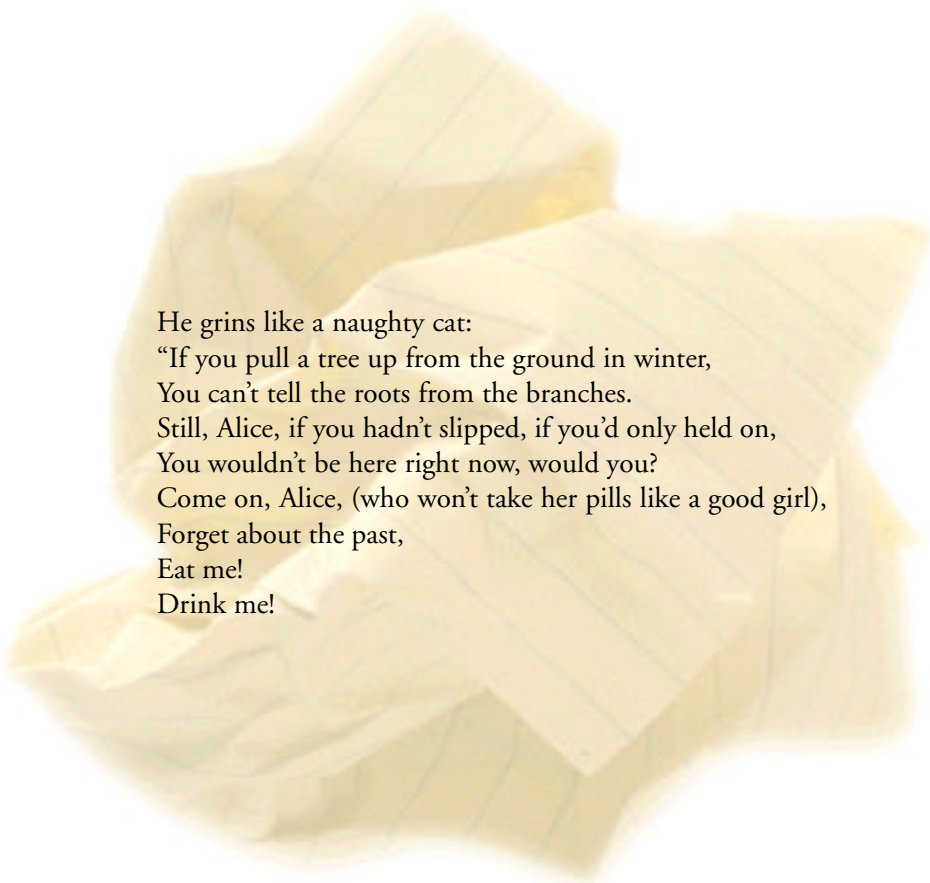
A mad woman thinks she's queen.
She tears her heart out by the roots.
He listens to her cry
Till his torso tears like paper
And his head loosens at the shoulders.
He renders his assessment:
"Potions and pills."

People shuffle in and out.
He gnaws his pencil like a carrot
And listens to each confession:
I was poisoned at a party.
I choked on the shard of a tea cup.
I crawled through the wrong door.
My insides are bloody.
My lungs are full to the nubs.
I remember lying on a mushroom,
Horrorified of a pipe-smoking worm.
At five they tweedled me by the sea.
My body dripped sand like an hour glass.

"But how does that make you feel?
What proof do you have?
Where has the time gone?"

I long for home.
My sister comforts me with words.
Her stories soothe my sickness like chicken soup.

She enters his office unexpectedly.
He's pumping someone up and down.
"Oh my," he hops off, "You're early.
Where has the time gone?"



He grins like a naughty cat:
“If you pull a tree up from the ground in winter,
You can’t tell the roots from the branches.
Still, Alice, if you hadn’t slipped, if you’d only held on,
You wouldn’t be here right now, would you?
Come on, Alice, (who won’t take her pills like a good girl),
Forget about the past,
Eat me!
Drink me!

Tarzan

Don't let them tell you
You're not a man!
You're mother adored you.
But they snipped you off like a rose bud
And gave you to the apes.

Every Darwinist's dream,
You grew with the animals,
Sucked on a monkey breast,
Ate bugs from fur out of sheer love
As you quivered in the cold.

But high society reclaimed you.
Shaggy and infested,
You agonized through the electric shock
Of walking upright,
After always crawling.
They dressed you in a blue uniform
Like a perfect little automaton
And tried the boy scout route.
They beat you down like a nail—
They sucked you dry as an Easter egg.
But corrupt authority did not suffice.
At 16 you changed your pledge
And abandoned all thought of Jesus Christ,
That lord of the apes.

But at the bottom of your dreams,
Cringing at the thought of Hell,
Dodging spells,
You only wanted one thing:
A woman wrapped in an animal skin!

The Fall

Ever tire of questioning?
Ever sicken of sorrow
Slinking around your neck like a spaghetti noose?
Ever desire the golden eggs of truth?
I do!

One night I hung my head outside and cried.
My tears fell into the soil like colored beans.
A chord bloomed outside my bedroom window.
The braided ivy stretched from ground to sky.
So the possibility was there, I knew.
But I didn't climb it
Till it sprouted leaves and branches.
Then I thought I'd climb that vine!
Why not die?

So I glided up to the Giant—
To the One who squeezes out love for us all-
Who rolls comfort to us
Like a moth ball.

“So can I play the old shell game?
Can I open the carton a little early?
Can I stay?”

A door opens in answer
And the air takes me.

Now I'm falling.

Now, who's to say

I'm not still

Falling?

Snow White's Stepmother (A Mad Woman's Lullabye)

The vacant hill
The shallow air
The shadow we call home
Lying on the lawn
Like a paperweight—
Here I'll raise you
I'll teach you to walk
I'll guide your feet
Across the sunless grass—
Each yellow blade compressed
Nothing will escape you—
An distant vessel
A flaming cross
A black-burnt heart—
Sinister breed
Bad baby
Mother of God
I wanted to silence you
To diffuse the acid
Loosed from your mouth
That devours me like hungry fish
Dear God

I gaze at the maze of stars
Outside our bedroom window
And am lost in the calligraphy!
Sinister breed—
Beautiful!
Beautiful!
I'll eat my own poisoned apple
I'll offer my heart on a dish
I'll dangle the moon before your
eyes
Then fold you in a blanket
My paper doll
But I'll never hold you
Or give you colored balloons!

Strange Mythology

We are fools!
 We are fools!
 The daisies that bloom,
 The blood of the rose,
 The broken-skulled sun dripping gold
 On the ripples of a pond—
 Even the loon's song
 Has deceived us.
 Nature's beauty
 Conceals a deeper pain
 Like a tattoo covers a pox mark

So we cry out to the rocks,
 Wanting to die!
 But science is silent.

We feel!
 We feel!
 Humanity—the sentient!
 We stand
 On a high rise,
 Debating the jump,
 Then realize that the earth
 Doesn't huddle on a turtle's back
 As the ancient's theorized,
 But scuttles across the galaxy
 Like a crab—
 But why?
 Why?
 And by what design?

Some day a rocket will go up
 And we'll zoom off to Venus or beyond.
 But for now we must linger
 In all this majesty
 Like blood blisters
 Trying to heal.

The Civilian

Mold covers her bread.
She chokes when she swallows.
The deserter takes it
As God's punishment for the war.

He gives her a gift that shouldn't long endure.
But she is gone for hours, and her mother worries.
Yet better than a Nazi, aye?

He shows her scars like shark bites.
He shows her gold-plated lighters that really burn.
He shows her snap shots of fiancés and red-lipped
Italian whores with teeth as straight as cartridges.
He shows her the American way.

Outside the sun set over a charred backdrop.
Mines explode.
Bullets pierce lungs and crack bones,
Tanks roll over rubble with nozzles erect
As middle fingers raised defiantly to God.

Battlefield

Blue icicles hang
From the tunnel's dark mouth.
From the other end,
Gray bodies wiggled out.

Corpses—some nude—
Some with worms—
Clutter the fields.

The camera man takes
A black and white snap shot.
His fingers stiffen
Over the camera's button,
Then dark sky marches out.

Training Rhesus Monkeys

My friend Jenny says she's found a job
Experimenting on rhesus monkeys.

I see them walk, one-by-one, holding a thin handrail.
Tails drag behind them like limp fish flippers.

Monkeys balance their awkward bodies
Like retarded ballerinas, offering gibberish
Throughout the forget-me-not days
Since science interrupted their jungle lives
Amid the ferns and vines and tropical plush.

He takes his next step,
Just like a year-old baby.

A scientist sits, quietly pondering,
Another takes feverish notes.
Fingers click across a laptop pc.

Some would say that love cannot be measured
In the microscopic lives of amebas.
No, that's all right.
I know you're not so hard-hearted
As to really enjoy animal testing—
You just have somebody else to pity.

Kingdom

Beneath the sky

The King wears his cloak with fine purple lining,
The young men say, cowering.
He sits or stands, mindful of others.
Anger and avarice wouldn't be honest—
Beneath a cruel sky,
Through which the castle's golden pinnacles protrude.

The jesters say so it is with our conscience,
Piercing our own corruption
Beneath a straining sky,
Dropping its meteors like eggs.

Someone cries or cleans house.
Pigeons splatter the windshield with little white droppings.
Somebody's lost a few more hairs—
But the ground is spotted with little purple violets.

We seek worldly matters and our own needs—
We know a little more or less than others.
But we'll never run away from Love again—
A hand is coming down from the sky.

Paper Cuts

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