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Publication Date

2013

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
RIVERSIDE

The Huge, Blue,
Jesus
Glass Statue

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Creative Writing and Writing for the Performing Arts

by

Joanna E. Robbins

December 2013

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University of California, Riverside

for my mothers
and my daughters:
may we continue
to grow

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disorder: lack of
stability confusion
irregular sun

I'm going to call 911!

Dad! Are you listening?

Dad isn't much of a responder.
I guess that's why I intervened.

You were screaming.
Running, like a child
through the house,
your arms in the air.
You'd been lying

in your California Queen
for months with the curtains drawn
around the mattress, like you,
yourself, a California Queen.

You. A child
You. A little girl.
You. A raging bitch.

You grabbed the crystal ashtray,
hucked it at Dad's head
but missed.

Then, whatever was in reach.
The portable phones.
The camera on the counter.
The salt. The pepper.
The sugar jars.

You think you're going to take me away?!
You think you can send me back?
You want to get a divorce?
I'm crazy? You think you've seen crazy?

One, by one,
out came the plates
like Frisbees.

Then, teacups,
you threw
at the ground.

bare foot to ember
heel to glass
leaves tiptoe imprints in grass

Perception

For hours, as a kid, I'd hide
in the bathroom
with the door locked,
drawing the images I saw
in the textures of the cream walls.
They would move
and change for me. A snake
would become a branch
that became a horse
with leaping legs. The face of a man
might later be a woman.
What always left me in awe,
and in some way
always brought me back,
was how things disappeared.

Perception II

It's documented
in my childhood files
of yellow paper sketches.

Right there. *See?*

A rooted tree. A bird.
A sun. On that day.
Once.

Age changes us.
Eyesight becomes worse.
We no longer
fill in the gaps.

We just see blurs
of empty space.

later
things always
look different.

When I was five
I wrote you a note:
*“If I could choose
my mom,
I’d choose you.”*
I meant it.

Step Mom

You taught me
how to plant flowers
in the ground,

to grow life
from dirt
not seeds.

*That would take too long, you said.
And you never know if they'll make it.*

We grew
from sprouted stems.

I'd pop them out
of the black plastic tray
and you'd show me how
to pack the soil
around the roots.

You were good
at making things feel
like they belonged together.

The Haunting

I've made an appointment with the priests.

Two of them came to see us
in the full black garb.
One, wore a coat
that hung to his knees.

They came in to our living room.
You sent us kids out to the garage
so they could work.

What could they be doing that we didn't do at church?
I pushed my ear against the door.
Haunted, you said. Built on an Indian burial ground.
I am the only non-Indian here. That's
why the spirits have chosen me.

First they prayed normal.
Our Father... and so on.

Then, this:
oggallaggadingdong whowhoodallalma

It terrified me.
My eyes widened
and I stood still
with uncertainty. What
was going on? What is this?

I ran to the front window.
You were kneeling.
The men
in black were standing over you,
their hands

pressed onto your chest
and back. They spoke their gibber jabber
until they didn't. Then,
they touched your forehead.

You were crying as you stood up.
They walked the length of our house

shaking smoking metal balls at the air.
Praying repetitive prayers.

Later
they drew crosses on our walls.

The illness was from the devil.
The devil was haunting our house.

There were lights
that turned themselves on
and off. In bed,
you were held down
by a spirit you couldn't see.

I Remember

the list of undiagnosable ailments,

the prescription pill bottles always
littering the nightstand.

the doctor's manual of diseases.

Prednisone made your face fat.
But morphine is what made you
not recognize yourself.

You passed out
in Nordstrom's
long enough to be locked in
after hours. The lights were out
and nobody was left
in the building. But you.

I don't even know
how that happens.

I remember
when you rubbed toothpaste
all over your face and body.
In the morning
you were unaware.

I remember
your drivers license.
When you marked your eyes as RED
And wrote down BLUE for your hair.
I had to fix your application.

Do you remember
the time you rammed
six cars in the parking lot
of your shrink?
You went inside screaming.

There have been accidents,
that you don't remember.

Two years in a row on Dad's birthday.
The last, you left
the crashed Cadillac at the scene
and hitched a ride home.

Dad got the call,
found the car—
there was no sign of you.

I Remember II

I remember
when you made chicken
and dumplings and forgot
to cook the chicken.

We all sat down
to dinner and it wasn't
until we were at the table
that you realized,

*Oops, I forgot
the chicken! So,
we ate dumplings.*

a bird isn't born
wretched that he cannot swim.
he knows no better

*Preparation: the action
or process of making
something ready
for use.*

*Sift flour, baking powder,
and salt together; add liquid
and mix to make a batter
that can be dropped
from a spoon. Drop
onto boiling stew. Cover
and cook for 10 to 15 minutes,
depending on size of dumplings.*

Floating

You said

Come on girls, get on the boat!,
shuffling my sister and I on to the steps
leading to the houseboat we rented
for the summer at the Colorado River.

I must have been seven.

You bought my sister and me matching red suits.
They had thin white stripes with crop cut T-shirts
that went over the suit. There are photos
from that trip with us posing together,
my sister and I with our hips popped out
like we were models.

When the sun went down,
I was certain
we were floating away.
Every night I woke you
crying.

You'd show me the anchor,
Look, right there is the chain
Honey, we are safe.

I'd stare at the bottomless abyss
watching for any kind of movement.
But because the water was rippling overtop,
I could never be sure
where the true ground was.

does the tadpole know
he will cultivate his own limbs
breathe and hop? breathe. hop.

Made From the Same Cloth

You,
In your preteen's bathing suit,
with pubic hair
going awry. And you
didn't seem to know. Or care.

At your son's house
all five girls were there
in the Jacuzzi.
You were high
on Morphine, Mom,
and wore the swimsuit
of a little girl.
You were unkept
And on display.
And everyone looked
away.

The Unseen

I think back to my childhood,
to the God who spoke from the plastic loaf
of bread sitting on our kitchen table.
Every morning we read
from a different slice,
scriptures, words, letters, combined together
to make up meanings for this life

we were living. I prayed for God
to save you, Mom.
To restore us
to some-kind of a normal family.

You taught us that God gave us
trials and tribulations to overcome
in order to build our character. That somehow
your illnesses were in fact creating
some kind of silver lining I had yet to see.

Do you remember when I said I saw Jesus
in the mirror of our living room?
We were having a family Bible study,
and in the mirror I saw the outline of a body.
I swear this really happened!
Maybe, it was an angel without wings.
Or, maybe, Mom, the devil.

Hold On

Get out of my house. Get out of my house!
You were dragging my laundry basket out of my room.
I grabbed the other side. It's like a tug of war
with you, Mom. It's always like a tug of war.

Don't think you can take me?
I'm an old woman compared to you.
Come on, you said, and shoved the hamper back at me.

I stumbled. Wouldn't fight you.
Get out, you bitch—it's not your house—get out!

Our Christmas trees used to be so big
that they reached the second floor ceiling
in the entry way. Dad would drag it in

and I'd pretend to help. When we built this house,
he let me lay the tile and smooth the grout.
Get out! Get out!

I dropped the basket. Grabbed the phone.
You threw my clothes. *Call your Daddy?*
Go ahead!

I did.
It's not my home.
You're not my mom.

Redeem

When you were sick
in bed, you loved
your pretty things.

You'd take your jewelry,
spill it out
and surround your sleep
in diamonds and gold.

Once after shopping
you announced *I saved*
800 dollars today.

Later, I found a huge,
blue, glass statue of Jesus
stuffed in the trunk of your car.

But that wasn't the worst of it.
The 2 carat diamond ring
you bought with our grocery money?
That was the year

Dad got our food on delivery
from some mass production warehouse.
A case of ketchup. Half a cow.
Two gallon jugs of pancake mix.
No expiration date.

Addiction

It started with pills.
“Accidents,”
that led to ER visits,
that eventually became,
*Call the hospital for me honey,
see if the compassionate
doctors are in.*

If that didn't work,
you'd throw yourself
down the stairs,
injure an arm,
bruise a tailbone,
crash a car. And when

that still wasn't enough,
the pain clinic
installed a morphine pump
inside your gut.

Every hour, on the hour,
it dripped, Mom,
morphine, into your spine,
not different than the kind
of treatment a cancer patient
would receive.

You would go in once a month
for a refill. It was that easy.
For years.
Pills and the pump.
Once, you told me
you weren't doing the pills anymore

and within minutes
while still talking to me
you were dislodging
a bottle of morphine
from the inside
of the fireplace.

I don't think you were trying

to pull off anything,
other than survival.
I don't think you remembered
telling me two minutes prior
that you were off the pills.
That's one of the things it does,
erases memories.

A duck's quack cannot echo
A duck's quack cannot echo
A duck's quack cannot echo

I Changed My Mind

They say that's my prerogative
as a woman,
to dig through the trash
to find the candy
that I thought I didn't want
or more realistically
didn't need
because my diet starts today,
no, now tomorrow,

right after I eat
this box of Peeps—
hot pink bunnies
covered in sugar
with little brown dots
for eyes, and maybe
a few more M&M's

because they taste good
and somehow
they feel good.

Late at night,
I sit alone
holding one less face

where a family used to be,
each bunny in row, attached at the hip,

like we used to be,
before you left
before I told you to go—

Get out,
Get the fuck out,
I believe were the words I used.

But nights like tonight
when digging through the trash
is an option,

I think about you.

when a tree is cold
it grows more leaves.

Sorry I

He hit the phone
out of my hand.

Choked me
while smashing my face
in to a wall

I threatened to run
to the neighbors
for help. But

I didn't leave.

Sorry 2

He peed on me in bed,
Held me down,
Both hands around my wrists,
And fucked me while I cried.
Yelling.

*You think I like this?
You think this is good for me
when you look like that?*

dogs can see better
when the light is low

Two Babies. Two Baby Daddies. (*Sorry 3*)

*Open the door! You fucking bitch.
Last night you sucked my dick,
Now you won't even talk to me?!
Fuck you, slut!*

I'm not sure how this happened.

sor·ry

- 1. Feeling or expressing sympathy, pity, or regret.*
- 2. Worthless or inferior; paltry.*
- 3. Causing sorrow, grief, or misfortune; grievous.*

I Hid in My Daughter's Room (*Sorry 1+2+3*)

He came to the window yelling.
I didn't think he could see.
There were pink curtains.

But then he punched through the glass.
He punched the window and shattered it.

Then, he left.

A third police officer caught him
while the first two officers
were still at my house
taking my statement.

The call came in
over their walkie talkies.
His hand was bleeding.
He needed to go to the hospital
before they would book him.

I filed a restraining order.
I never showed up to court.

keep a goldfish in the dark
and he will turn white

Shelter

Dad built us that house.
There.
On the top of the hill.
With his own hands.

Always been a hard worker. Dedicated
and loyal. Loves taking care of us.
Makes him proud. Do you remember

when he surprised you with your first new car?
The maroon four-door Chrysler with velvety seats.
He came home and parked it out front.
It was filled with balloons.

He liked that kind of stuff. He still takes
all the girls prom dress shopping.
It's tradition.

We bought mine
on Rodeo Drive.

It was an all-day excursion.
A beautifully green,
floor-length fitted dress.
I was a princess.

Did you
want to be a princess, Mom?

To be rescued
from your tower?

To be rescued
from yourself?

Father Catfish

I read somewhere
that father catfish
keep eggs
in their mouths
until they are ready
to hatch, depriving
themselves
of food, sometimes
for several weeks.

I couldn't help
but remember
all those catfish
I caught
with my own father,

how their lungs
protruded
as I wheeled them in.

How disgusted I was.

I misunderstood.

More than Once

I didn't bring people home in high school, Mom,
because I was embarrassed.

When Gina brought her boyfriend home
you O.D.'d on prescription pills.

They had to drive you to the ER
to get your stomach pumped,
the three of you shoulder to shoulder,

in her boyfriend's bench-seat pick-up truck.

These things happened.

They happened so often
that when you would run to your room
to take another bottle of pills,
Dad would just sit

at the table and drink his coffee.
He'd finish his meal before rising

to load you up and over his shoulder
like it was just another day at work.

Sometimes
you sat in your room

called the whole family
to tell them you'd be dying soon.

Sometimes
I think Dad was waiting

for you to die.
Sometimes

I think he even hoped
you might. Mom,
we all did.

Sometimes We Talked

about how maybe
we should help
you die.

Horrible,
but it's true.

We discussed
grinding pills
into your food

but we never got past
the point
of the conversation itself.

The One Time

I did
bring someone home
we had to take you
to the hospital too.

I heard the garage door open.
I looked out the window,
saw you half-way up
the long driveway.

You were still sitting in your big Cadillac.
The door was open.
Your legs were turned out,
heels on the cement.

You slurred, *Park my car, Jo.*

You didn't even say hello.

Your paper bag had a wine bottle in it.
You slung your Channel purse over your shoulder

and tried to stand up.
You faltered a little,

then walked on,
the motor still running.

I was still that child on egg shells, Mom.

You made me run upstairs.
You were wearing a neck brace.

You opened bottle after bottle, taking pills
with whatever was in the glass.

The double-sized bottle of wine
was almost empty.

You complained about pain. In your back.
Your neck. Something was wrong. "Call

the hospital. Ask which doctors are on tonight.”

I knew what to do.
I'd done this before.

The “compassionate” doctors weren't there.
“The pain! The pain!” A few more pills.

Your hands shook too much
to open the bottles.

My new boyfriend was with me,
standing against the wall.
I forgot to introduce him.
I forgot he was there.

In your recliner, you debated what to do.
I hovered and waited for your direction.

“The hospital,”
you said. “I need to go.”

And so, with my boyfriend at the wheel of your Cadillac,
we drove to the hospital so you could plead for more.

In the waiting room I welcomed him to the family.

We ordered pizza. Dad showed up.

They gave you a shot.
You sat down to join us,
opened your purse
and popped two more pills.

a cockroach can
stay alive for days
without its head

Remember means to bring to mind or think of again, but you have to know it happened in the first place to remember it at a later time.

My oldest daughter was six the year you finally got off the morphine, Mom, the year Dad finally left you, for eight months, just after you walked in-to the bank, high, and withdrew \$30,000 from Dad's business account.

Somehow you always pulled a paycheck from the business for a job you never did. Ironically, on paper, you were the Treasurer.

You said you don't remember what you did with the money.

You said you don't remember a lot.

My oldest daughter was seven on the first Christmas that you remembered her being there. But we had been home every year for Christmas, Mom.

My oldest daughter was six the year you finally checked yourself into a detox unit, and finally had the morphine pump removed.

That same year, when my oldest daughter was six, you were finally diagnosed Bipolar.

disorder: lack of
stability confusion
irregular sun

Mom on ECT

One more treatment and I'll be happy.

I don't even know why I am doing this-
What?

Z-o-m-b-i-e?

Your father says I'm like a z-o-m-b-i-e.

Emily's mom works at a hotel in San Diego. I'm gonna talk to her.
I'll find her and see what she thinks.

Are you going to church?

I don't even know if I'm in touch with reality.

Cuz life gets pretty hairy out there.

I wanna go see Gary.
I could call Gary tomorrow.
What? It's a holiday?
Shepard's class

Who was a Shepard?
Honey, was Jesus a sheperd?

...that watched over the flock

Cuz I've been a Christian a long time.

Not gonna do AA anymore
I've done all I can do.

Patterns

When the air of uncomfortability
overtook the space of our home,
it was always time to pack. Really,
what I mean is, it was time for me or Dad
to pack whatever basic necessities you would need
for an extended stay. Which in this case
could be tricky because dental floss
could be used as a weapon, and lipstick,
well, I still don't know what lipstick can be.
But it can't be brought in,
passed the double doors that lead
to what you called the lock-down.
The long hallway that houses the crazies
behind peek-a-boo windows
that reminded me of the Jack in the Box toy—
and that fear, I held as a kid—
waiting for it to pop.

I cranked into each turn knowing
what eventually was coming,
holding my breath
with my teeth clinched in preparation
for that moment
that inevitably made me feel bad.
And then,
I'd do it again.

Where *Sorry* Begins

*Let's get up in the night, he said,
Make popcorn. Watch a movie.*

I had a bed
on the floor
in Grandma's room,
but she was old, and
hard of hearing when awake.

*Don't tell Grandma, said Uncle Jim
It was 2AM when I woke up.
(Or maybe he came in and got me?)*

The TV was fuzz in the living room.
Black -white squares hummed the dark.

*You missed the movie!
I'm about to go to bed!*

I was sad. He ate all the popcorn by himself.
I remember I wanted to look in the trash.

He said,

come here

then grabbed my hand.
I stepped into his bedroom, reluctantly.

Uncle Jim wore sweatpants.
His hairy chest was bare.

*Will you give me a massage?
My back hurts.*

He lay on the floor by the bed,
his head partway out the door,
I sat on his butt and smeared lotion
in circles with my soft hands, child hands.
I used too much.
I dumped it like ketchup.

My turn, he said.
I want to give you one.
Mom, I checked out.

I might have been already naked.
I might have been sitting on him with bare legs.

He was rubbing my body.
Spreading man hands
down the bare of my back
and in-to my ass. My ass!
He kept pulling at it,
yanking the cheeks apart.
His thumbs, grazed
my center.

Mom, I said *nothing*.

It's just the human body.

As if to comfort me.
Over and over and over and over and over and over.

*It's just the human body just human body just the human human body body
just*

As if to comfort me he talked about God
And Adam and Eve and maybe he quoted Bible verses.

It's the devil who made us self-conscious not God

He stood over me, his hands on the inner-edge
of both his hipbones, inside his grey pants
with the elastic waist
under which he wore *nothing*.

I had never seen pubic hair until that moment.
Black and everywhere and curly.

The uncertainty became certain.

He set me on his knee.
He knelt the way a man would kneel.
you know I love you don't you?

Mom, I just nodded.

I want to be naked together.
I want to do what naked people do together.

But I just wanted to go to bed.

“Uncle Jim, I’m tired.”
Those were the only words I remember.
The only thing I could softly squeak.
I sat on his knee. “I’m tired.”

He hugged me again and again and again and again.

you know that I love you don't you?

He let me put my clothes back on as he watched.

only half of a dolphin's brain sleeps
at a time. the awake half
makes the dolphin come up for air.

A False Appearance

You came at two pm
I was in Grandma's room
with the door shut
pretending to be asleep
pretending to be asleep
pretending to be asleep

when you opened the door
I darted to the driveway
climbed in your car
and waited

Grandma and Uncle Jim
me in the car
you on the doorstep
you guys were laughing
I couldn't hear
but you were laughing

I Was Crying

Gina said, "He gives me the creeps. I don't like him."
It was Uncle Jim. Your brother, Mom.
There was talk downstairs
about him coming for dinner.
In our brand new house.
Gina and I were sitting on the top of the stairs
folding laundry. A year passed
before we spoke of him after that.

Repress Remorse

The guilt, for you,
a demon
that chased you
in the dark.
You don't remember
telling me,
but you did.

*I thought Daddy
would leave me
if he found out.*

You kept
a conscious
secret.

To not know.
To not know.
To know.
To not know.
Not know
Knot. No.
No.

I Cut

Dad pressed charges. A social worker came
to the house. She was young. And pretty.

She was sitting on the edge of the couch
when I came into the living room.

I sat in the furthest chair and slouched in a ball.
My hands were in my lap.

She handed me cloth dolls
with real clothes.

I laid the girl on the pillow (she was asleep).
The boy doll I undressed. The dolls had
people parts.

I put him over her and cut the pillow
with my hands

Into the middle
and back out.
Into the middle
and back out.
Into the middle
and back out.

I made a crease. *It was—like that?* The social
worker asked. I shrugged. I guess.

Sick

go to your happy place

Instantly I'm a child
in a pink night gown, in a hospital,
sick with pneumonia.
You and Dad beside me.

You are "fuzzing" my arm.
You have acrylic nails
that make music
against hard surfaces.

I love
when you touch
your fake
French tips
to my skin.

I love. When?
You touch.

I love. When?
You're fake.

I love. When?
My skin.
When?
When?
When?

if you cut off a snail's eye,
it will grow a new one.

He Guesses

On the phone I asked you and Dad separately,
“Why would you have left me there
if you knew he had already been to jail?”

Dad fumbled for speech. Stuttered.
Told me to ask you. He said,
“I had never heard that.” He said,
“I only met him a couple times.
He came over and helped put stone up.
But I don’t ask a lot of questions.”

He said, “I didn’t even know him.”
He guesses he came back from ‘Nam weird.
That’s what he heard anyway.

You Lie

You admitted you knew
he had been to jail.

*But I didn't know what for, Joanna.
And he wasn't there very long.*

Later, you took it back,
claimed you didn't know
he had ever been in jail.

*Honey, God, I don't know.
It was so long ago, but you weren't little.*

I was in third grade.

*I have no idea, Jo, but it was before
I got bad on morphine. Was I—
bad on morphine? I don't think I was.*

You said you never went to your mother's house anymore...

He took care of mom...

And— I took care of you.

II

You told me
I stayed awake
You told me
I didn't sleep
You told me
He tricked me
There wasn't
a movie
And I wasn't
Sneaky
And I'm not
To blame

And I do not
Need to feel
Ashamed

It Was Still a Secret

even after I told my sister

even after I told the social worker who came to our house

even after the courts locked him behind bars

even after the summer of my nightmares,
the ones I don't remember
though my real mother tells me I had them

even after I screamed in the night
and woke up crying

even after I couldn't say what I was dreaming
just that I was scared

even after my real mother phoned you and Dad

even after you blamed her for my "irrational" fears

her lifestyle

her partner

anything— right?

as long as it wasn't you.

You Don't Get to Forget

Say Uncle,
give in,
put out
scraps for the dog,
meat on the bone
bone on the meat,
pull at the ass

Uncle, one more time,
I'm tired
I'm numb,
I'm not sure
what's being done,

go away,
go to jail,
come back,
go again,
come back
born, you say, again,

Sing-song sing-song
Jesus oh Jesus
the blood
of oh Jesus

You cannot dilute
the red
of my skin, this sin
this sin this sin,

Oh no, you cannot
wash me away,
you hear me,
you stay,

day, after day
year after year,
you with me

you stay, you stay

you stay
Jesus oh Jesus
the blood
of oh Jesus

You cannot dilute
the red
of my skin, this sin
this sin this sin,

lives in, lives in,
lives in,
this bed, this house,
this head of mine,

yes you
you cannot
wash me away
you hear me,

I stay,
day, after day
year after year,
Oh me with you
I stay, I stay
I stay. I stay,
I stay, I stay,
I stay.

deer cause more human deaths
than any other species.

Acceptance

My freest, most memorable moments
came in the open spaces of hills shaded
by Eucalyptus trees. Before the idea of possession
and ownership was presented as an option,
this land, in my single-digit years, was a playground
to climb, to dig, to explore beneath
the surface and find sometimes answers,
but more often, questions- in what seemed to be
the obvious purpose. Oh, to be a child again!

It never occurred to me
that someone could own dirt, that someone could own
trees and leaves. That was like saying
someone owned the wind.

Then the land was sectioned off
and plotted for homes. Tractors moved in,
cleared the foundation,
leaving lifeless, flat dirt squares
and a group of outraged kids behind.

We wrote messages with sticks in the ground,
warnings that the hills were haunted.
When that didn't work we took to chiseling
at the edge of the cliff with rocks,
thinking somehow this would shorten their lot, thus,
I guess, not permitting them enough space to build
whatever fancy home they had envisioned
on what we called, "our cliffs." That too,
went unnoticed and the homes went up,
marking for the first time in my life, notable boundaries
I had no control over.

Haboob

Five
big-winged
black birds
circle
something dead
I can't
yet see.

The cliff
in it's boastful
red standstill
seems more
than accepting
of the lack
of life here.

The blink
of an eye.
A sky
turns
black.

Armageddon
dust rolls
wipe
my path.

I'm putting masks
on my daughters
and taping doors
shut, but
nothing

I can do
stops us
from breathing.