

## Cross/Bite

I was born into this world sideways.  
Doctor said,  
    *surgery*, to break my face  
set it right again  
    as if breaking were simple.  
Wet places my lips have been:  
    all the boys I've kissed—  
so many caves I've licked  
    saliva & sweat  
holy water on my tongue.  
    I grind my teeth at night  
wake to white sand in my mouth:  
    nocturnal silt, gritty loam.  
My jaws pop when I talk  
    but if I had the surgery, went cosmetic?  
Oh, the typewriter in my bones—  
    yes, I would miss that click/clack the most.

## Cottonmouth

The man's mouth unhinged.

He said *I broke my jaw  
and it open likes this now.*

I heard the wet click  
of little bones unfastening.

~

I woke up before anyone else  
and walked outside barefoot

to the chilled porch still slick  
with a thin layer of morning dew.

There was a little coral snake  
asleep, coiled by a rocking chair.

I wasn't afraid this time.

~

We were told the snake  
was the most beautiful thing

God created until the snake  
wanted to be God or like a god

or godlike. I'm not sure now.

~

It happened again—the same dream.

~

I have seen three women give birth  
and with each contraction  
the mighty hips break and stretch,  
the leathery mouth of a snake.

I watched as they writhed  
inside the all-consuming pain, pure as God,  
fists clenched, wailing something  
not quite human, but animal enough.

~

Once, she dreamt she swallowed  
a snake till she *became* the snake—  
looping, legless reptile, thick  
and aching. She woke up paralyzed  
until she shouted *Jesus*. Her arms  
grasping the invisible beast, blacking  
the dark.

~

The guy with the broken mouth  
baptized me once inside a Pentecostal

church. He said I had to be fully  
immersed for it to count for heaven,  
you know.

He said Jesus's name only—  
No trinity, just Jesus.

Then he touched me under the water.  
Plucked and dripping, I came

to the surface, and I shouted and they shouted.  
Everyone's mouths open in praise.

~

The snake hisses like a married man.  
He measured and whispered slow

*You better. Get out. Of my car.*

In a way that meant *devour*:  
to swallow *me* whole—

crystalline sweat stippled across his forehead,  
his eyes, feral and glinting like two tiger eye  
gemstones. The street glazed with vulgar light.  
I felt so vulnerable when the tiny metals  
unlatched





~

What if he wanted to leave  
his wife and find another keeled  
and granular body? His belly travels  
like a snake. She believes her father  
is also snake.

~

I have so many dark scars and purpled bruises  
on my legs.

I have my mother's knees, crunchy and difficult.  
Everything hurts when I'm about to go to sleep.

The snake is ready for me, *shhhhh*.

~

Every time she passes this one motel she shivers  
at the things she did with her body to the man

with the mouth of a snake—all his holy,  
masculine fire  
consuming her—whole, she was taken.

After.

He prayed for forgiveness. Not from her.  
But from God. To make him able and clean again.

She is always in that room  
on the bed, naked  
like prey.

~

I've got two fangs in my mouth that could pierce you.  
My cross-bite never ground down my teeth.

I used to bite myself in my sleep, but never drew blood.  
I gave birth to myself—and held myself there. There.