ODE ON FIRE

I am setting myself on fire with Jehovah, with Mohammed,
with night bombing drones over Syria,
because the world is ending as it does every day, with the sun
burning a quicksilver blaze, its cities falling into a desert
of hunger and thirst, and someone’s lighting a match in the wind
storming across Siberia, Kansas, Venezuela, Qatar,
in every heart hard as quartz in its mansion of gristle and fat,
while towns set themselves aflame with the wig-wag lights
of police cars, their howling blue, their powpowpow, and streets explode
while Joey Ramone screams on the cosmic radio, I don’t care
I don’t care I don’t care, and the sky tumbles into its jinx of cerulean
and copper, offers up its mystery to any punk traveling
at the speed of light, because this our science, our sorcery, our Snapchat
surveillance of Time, that two-bit huckster on the corner
of Bollywood and Rhyme, who says, Pick a card, any card,
and whattaya know, it’s Knight, Death, and the Devil,
because the plague is seething in our mitochondria, in our guts,
on our tongues, and this is our word hoard, our dictionary
of love and conflagration, our bible of fallen walls and trumpets,
so I am setting myself on fire with nickel bags of hooey,
handing cigars to Big Daddys at the Tropicana while revolution
sneaks into Havana with its guillotines, its blood bath,
its glorious Technicolor Fords and Chevys, so be afraid, comrades,
because I am the cigarette girl with the bazooka of annihilation,
the Dim Bulb heroine of this hum-drum-let-them-eat-cake-zero-sum game
hullabaloo, yeah, baby, that stew of screw-them-all-you-can strum
on the karmic guitar, so I’m setting myself on fire with the dead-eye
plasma TVs in living rooms off I-10, the KKK Krispy Kreme
diaspora shaking jowls from sea to shining sea, O say can you see the sun
coming up, a ball of fire or a fair hot wench in flame-coloured
taffeta, it matters not, brothers and sisters, as we fly through the universe
of black holes, awash in the cast iron trembling of the stars.
This morning I read about a couple arrested
for selling hundreds of tickets to heaven
which they said were made from pure gold
and all you have to do is hand yours over
to St. Peter and you are ushered into paradise. Tito Watts,
the mastermind of this scheme, told the police
Jesus gave him the tickets in the parking lot
behind the KFC and told him to sell them
so he could pay Stevie, an alien Tito met at a bar,
to take him to a planet made of drugs.
“You should arrest Jesus,” said Tito. “I’ll wear a wire
and set him up.” His wife agreed they both
wanted to leave Earth, and I know how she feels,
because most newspaper stories are such a bummer—
sexcapades, lying, the Russians—so Jesus, where
is my golden ticket? Not that I’m all that keen
to go to heaven, but I would like to go to Vietnam
and Cambodia, though I guess a travel agent
could set that up for me, and I’m always fantasizing
about dropping in on Haydon’s immortal dinner
and eavesdropping on Keats and Wordsworth or spending
a fortnight in London in 1601, seeing Shakespeare
as Hamlet’s father’s ghost, taking in the general squalor
and maybe picking up some manuscripts
from the printing house floor, tucking them in my farthingale,
and then taking off to Chawton Cottage to stalk
Jane Austen for a while, though in that dress it’s going to be hard
to go incognito, so maybe I should wear black jeans,
and you may be forgiven for thinking that I’ve touched down
on that planet of drugs, but who needs them
really when your mind can spin out its own delirium,
a dream here, a phantasmagoria there, and right now
I’m fixated on Tito wired to bust Jesus, and doesn’t it seem
sometimes as if we’re all hanging around the KFC
waiting for something supernatural to appear, not Jesus,
but maybe Walt Whitman walking to New Orleans
with his brother, a cloud of words crowding out Stevie
and the other aliens as Walt fuels his own dream
of America where we're looking after each other instead
of grubbing for all the moolah we can stuff
up our backsides, though a friend of my sister's says that Earth
is an alien penal colony, and we're all doing time
for crimes against the universe, so I guess Stevie's a rogue
guard in the Florida penitentiary, and sometimes
my body does seem like a prison of sprains and back pain,
my mind like the trenches at Verdun—the mud,
the mustard gas—yet when the war is over, I'm still alive,
seem to have all my limbs, every cup of tea
is ambrosia, and if that’s not enough, it’s May, jasmine
and roses are blooming, my heart clambering
over the clouds as if on wings, and I can't help but think
of Solzhenitsyn looking back on his years in the gulag
saying, “Bless you, my prison, for having been in my life.”
ODE ON MY MOTHER’S LINGO

*I’ll bet you any amount of money,* my mother used to say
when speculating on some disruption of the moral order,
not that she was a betting woman, far from it, but she was sure
of her place in the world and also that of the malcontents,
laggards, lollygaggers, pettifoggers, miscreants, and prevaricators
as well as those prone to bombast, persiflage,
and just plain lying, not to mention the various forms of verbal
chicanery described in her day by the snappy patter
she picked up from the movies in the thirties and forties
when Rosalind Russell and Carol Lombard were snipping
dialogue into origami snowflakes, and often after I would go on
about some crazy idea or crack-brain fantasy,
she would fix me with her basilisk stare and say, “I have no
earthly idea what you’re talking about,”
or “Wake up, you’re living in a dream world,” and I was,
because in that dream world my mind was a flying machine
taking me around the planet in however many days I had on earth,
and I could go back in time or forward into a godless
future without weekly visits to church with its admonitions
about a woman’s place, which my mother chafed against
as much as she embraced them, her steely mind disgusted
by the hypocrisy of her fellow Baptists while believing
a better place awaited her, and my thoughts would damn me,
so when my mother would say, “I doubt your salvation,”
I’d act hurt, because she’d plotz if she knew how far I’d strayed
from the path, but she did know, because, she’d also say,
“I can read you like a book,” and I wanted so much to get away
from that microscope, though now that I am free from her eye,
I want it back, not because I think she was right, but because she loved
me so much, and how much I took that love as my due,
when I was the luckiest girl in the world and kind of knew it
but didn’t really in the core of my being, because you need
the testimony of all the people you’ve met who didn’t have someone
checking up on them, and saying, “Who do you think you are,
young lady?” and “I have a bone to pick with you,” and “I have to watch
you like a hawk.” She’d often say, “You’ll understand
when you have your own daughter,” and I thought, “That’s never going
to happen. Why would I want to produce an ungrateful bitch
from my own body to sass me and think that money grows on trees,”
and when I was furious with my brother, she would become Jehovah,
“Vengeance is mine, sayeth the Lord,” and he always got what was coming
to him, like the time she thought he might be stealing money
from her, so she waited until they were alone in the house and planted
a ten in her purse, and lickety-split it was gone,
and when she confronted him, he denied it, and she said, “We’re
the only ones here. What did I do—steal it from myself?”
But I feel sorry for my brother, because one of my teachers told
my mother I had an imagination, and she should encourage it
(thank you, Mrs. Stokes), so from then on I could lie
with impunity while he was sent to bed without supper
or threatened with eternal damnation, which goes to show you
there’s no justice in the world, just like when I couldn’t
find my math book, looked everywhere for it, and finally yelled,
“Mom, where’s my book? I have a test tomorrow,”
and she pointed to the table, raised her eyebrows,
and said, “If it had been alive, it would have bitten you.”
“See you in the funny papers,” my dad would quip
whenever we’d say goodbye, and I’d think,
“Blondie or Doonesbury?” though if it were a comic strip
of our own dear family, it might be called
Psycho Family Circus or Krazy Kat Goes to Church,
but even now, twenty years later I wake up so stupid,
the funny papers are just my speed until my blood
is spiked with caffeine and sunlight, and there they are
my cartoon friends, the sweet cop and his nurse wife,
the woman married to the Star Wars nut,
the existential office worker, the fat lazy cat, the bird colony
where all magpies hang out at a treetop diner,
and Dagwood and Blondie, though Blondie and Tootsie
have their own business now, but any strip
with Elmo or Daisy lifts my spirits, and isn’t Daisy
a kind of Greek chorus, though being a dog
she has no words, but like murder in Hamlet, she can speak
with most miraculous oratory, and I think
of all the comics I loved as a girl, Prince Valiant
and his beautiful wife Aletha, giving me
my first taste of Camelot, then Lil’ Abner and Pogo, one a bludgeon
and the other a stealth bomber, and later strips
like Calvin and Hobbes because who doesn’t have a tiger
getting you in trouble, and The Far Side’s Hell
(“Welcome to hell. Here’s your accordion”), and my dad’s
strip of his own life could have been an essay
on moving from the torment of his father dying when he was
five to joining the Navy and landing in the battle
of Leyte Gulf, where he tells of seeing the burning skull
of a kamikaze pilot rolling across the deck
of the aircraft carrier as he ran to deliver a radio message
to his captain, and I think of my own constructions
of heaven and hell, one a quiet darkened room with Mozart
and thousands of books and the other my real life
with brothers and sisters fighting over cretinous TV shows
and who ate the last piece of cake, yet one life
moves into another, and you end up finding that room
with its music and Proust, but along the way
you encounter Mammy Yokum and her “Good Night,
Irene punch,” the crazy elections that put former

B-movie actors and draft-dodging frat boys in charge
of blowing up the world, but the quiet dinners
on the patio, and that bottle of Pouligny-Montrachet
that changed my DNA, and who knows
what the next day’s adventures will bring—Herb
borrowing a tool from Dag, or it’s The Far Side
and hell again. The happy guy’s whistling while he burns,
the devils saying, “We’re not getting to him,”
and he’s the one I want to be, shoveling brimstone
but whistling like Papageno, crazy enough
to walk into the fire, stupid enough not to be afraid.
ODE ON MY GRANDMOTHER THE MOHEL

When I tell my mother that a man I know pickets the local hospital about what his wife calls “his topic” that is, circumcision and its evils, she tells me that this was my grandmother’s specialty as a nurse, and I say, “You’re kidding.” “No. The doctor she worked for couldn’t stand it, so she did all his circumcisions. She loved it!” Loved it? I think—cutting the foreskins off boys’ penises? Loved what? The precision? The power? The cries? And I remember sitting with my mother and grandmother when I was seven or eight, pretending to play, so I could listen to them talk in front of my grandparents’ house in Washington, 328 Maryland Avenue, and down the tree-lined street you could see the Capitol dome looming. A couple were walking on the sidewalk, and they waved at my grandmother, who smiled and waved back. “Are they married?” my mother asked when they passed. “No,” my grandmother answered, “they’re just shacked up.” The cups of my ears gathered around those words like ravenous Venus flytraps, because this was just what I had been waiting for, though I had no idea what it meant and knew I couldn’t ask or my doll dressing and tuneless singing would be exposed for the subterfuge they were, and I’d be exiled into the house, and this was before my grandfather died, who didn’t think a woman should drive, but my grandmother taught herself, her two little girls in the back seat screaming as the car jerked over the dirt road behind their house in Kentucky, and then after he died, she went to school and became a nurse, but fifty years later I’m chatting with a man on a plane, who’s returning home after spending the day in New York because he’s a mohel and has made this long trip to snip some skin off a little boy’s penis, and I think of Mantegna’s painting of the circumcision of Christ at the Uffizi and kosher laws which forbid eating crustaceans, which would mean a sacrifice of gumbo, bouillabaisse, cioppino and fish soups the world over, and the fried Apalachicola shrimps that broke the back of my vegetarianism, what in Louisiana they call “sramps,” and I’ve heard them called “pinks,” “scrimps,”
and sometimes when I'm standing over the stove making a roux
my life seems to be a kind of gumbo, and if you don’t burn
the water-and-flour paste, then it doesn’t much matter what else
you throw in, but okra is a must and a couple dozen
oysters, andouille sausage—all your dark mistakes mixed in
with the brilliant medals and diamond tiaras.

My grandmother told me she went to her wedding
in a horse and buggy, a seventeen-year-old girl,
probably a virgin and little did she know where that road
would lead her, from canning tomatoes and corn
to snipping the tips off thousands of penises to the nursing home
where she died, shacked up with all her selves,
that particular gumbo stewing in a body withered by 93 years,
not knowing anything but that she’d rather be eating
ice cream, driving to Memphis, frying chicken, mashing
potatoes, baking a cake with blackberries her daughters
picked that morning before their dawdling walk to school.