

## 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 hooley,  
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.

## ODE ON MY PRISON

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.”

## ODE ON THE FUNNY PAPERS

“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, shackled 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.