



*Fortitude:  
A Collection of Poems*

*by: Jacqueline Becker*  
*Department of English*

Dreams

A Trip to the Zoo

Anne

A Harrowing Experience

Roadside Religion

*First Place 2016 English Department Graduate Poetry*

## Dreams



I like to watch            the spiders            build webs  
But in my dreams they are not sticky and transparent.  
They glitter.

Giant works of art constructed by minuscule perfectionists  
Hell-bent on destruction immediately following completion.

Rescue the webs!            Until it is morning            and I walk  
Through one and am condemned to feel microscopic bodies  
crawling all over me            burrowing into my skin.

I should have stayed asleep or maybe never went to sleep?  
Sleep. Dreams. They are responsible for my unrealistic  
Fascination with webbing and subsequent paranoia.



## A Trip to the Zoo



Strength radiates, from somewhere, deep inside of me.

Yet—all I feel is pain,  
Locked in a cage,  
Forced to play at being tame.

I lay here, docile,  
Biding time,  
Quiet—

As time passes— my keepers believe that they have won.

I pace the length of my confinement— ignore the faces pressing  
In on me  
Day by day.

I see them gather, marveling at the caged beast—  
Once proud and ruthless

Now

Exerting my rule over plastic bottles.

But, I am watching,  
I am waiting.

The crowd is vast, the time is now

Slowly

I rise

Ready to address them:

The roar rips through my throat, primal, in its ferocity

The large ones jump and the little ones tremble

But all are stunned silent

As I remind them

I AM KING.

"Ja main droite, c'est, mon seigneur: Ja Vertu, J'Amour Je Mort"  
 An engraved French sword that proclaims:  
 She raises her arms, ready to meet her executioner,  
 Fear begins to cloud her eyes as she lay down her head,  
 She kneels, looking out at the crowd,  
 It brushes against her pale and slender neck,  
 Her dark hair tumbles down, released from her hood,  
 She brushes against her pale and slender neck,  
 And renders her touchable once again.  
 But now it stands for barren,  
 Proclaiming, "Not me tanger, for Caesar's I am"  
 Once it marked her as untouchable,  
 As shaky hands released it from its perch,  
 The golden "B" glitters at her throat,  
 With eyes forever searching for the pardon that will save her:  
 She proclaims her innocence, begs his mercy,  
 She never flinches, but delivers her speech flawlessly,  
 Watered the night before by the blood of her friends and brother,  
 Sliding through the grass on the Tower Green,  
 Her passion has infatuated the King for years.  
 Surely she will not be executed,  
 Believing this to be yet another game in their affair,  
 She stands with her head held high,  
 Sunlight bouncing playfully off the well-polished surface.  
 The block resting peacefully,  
 A brightly illuminated platform,  
 Impatiently waiting for the newest bout of courtly entertainment.  
 A deafening hum, dozens of voices excitedly chattering,  
 It was a warm spring day.



Anne



## A Harrowing Experience



*It sounds like laughter  
Cut off, hanging in the air, exaggerating the sudden silence.  
Walking into a room, ready to save a life,  
Only to realize you may never be walking out.*

*It is not paralytic.  
It is like fast forward—in slow motion.  
Your mind becomes a cacophony of sound  
And you see everything and nothing all at once.*

*I hear an authoritative voice (mine?) say:  
“I forgot my bag. Please, go back outside and get it.”  
I do not move toward the door but my partner does.  
I hear it open—close—and I know that he is safe.*

*The woman with the gun, she hasn't moved.  
Her eyes meet mine—*

*I see Hell reflected there: an emptiness that comes from knowing your life has been ripped from you.  
This is the look of loss. It screams help me while simultaneously alienating you. It is the death of hope.*

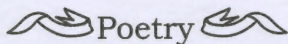
*The recognition on my face causes her to speak—  
“My son is asleep, he won't wake up.”*

*One glance at the infant—  
Tiny arm, lifeless, as it dangles from his mother's embrace,  
Lips—blue tinged and slightly opened,  
I know that he has gone; no help from me can call him back.*

*His mother feels his body cooling.*

*I can see resolve hardening her face, She will not live without her son.*

*I speak: “He is beautiful” —*



*I lie: "If you put the gun down and hand him to me I can help."*

*Her eyes lock on mine; lit with a new hope that burns me where I stand.*

*She tosses the gun to the table,  
Careless in her haste to give me her child.*

*His body is cold.*

*I lift his face to mine—gently place my lips upon him—exhale a single breath that fills his hollow lungs*

*Her face pleads with me as I place my hand on his chest.  
"I need to take him to the ambulance," I whisper.*

*Sirens fill the air as the door opens,  
Voices chatter as I walk to my ambulance.  
Ignoring everyone, I hold him tight. I climb inside.*

*I lay him down—unwrap his slight body—change his soiled diaper.*

*He could be a doll.*

*I swaddle him in a warm towel—I place a soft knit hat upon his head.*

*I turn, ready for what comes next.*

*Climbing down, I scan the crowd,  
I find his mother sitting on the porch—Head in her hands.  
The police bombard her with questions.  
She looks up with a new understanding as I carry her son to her.*

*I look directly in her eyes:  
"I did everything I could."*

*I return her son to her arms.  
I turn to walk away—I hear her call:  
"Thank You."*

*I saved a life today.*



## Roadside Religion



### I

Staring out the window, passing the time as we make the hour-long  
journey home,  
Memories flood in vivid color:

The feel of your hand, calloused and rough against the smoothness of mine.  
The taste of your lips; stale cigarettes and a hint of whiskey mixing with my  
cherry chap-stick. How your body molds to mine even with our clothes on.

Reality comes crashing back when I realize I'm on fire.

Pulling the truck over, jumping out, stomping the smoldering sections of  
the blanket we begin laughing. Your eyes lock on mine, the laughter stops;  
suddenly, there is too much space between us. Our logical response to our  
miniscule life and death event is roadside sex, but then I notice the sign:

**GREATER CHURCH OF CHRIST  
ANNUAL LEPRECHAUN HUNTING  
OPEN SEASON  
NEXT RIGHT**

Breathlessly I ask: What the Fuck is Leprechaun Hunting. The mood is  
broken. You walk back to the driver's side and climb behind the wheel. It's  
only about three miles before you look over to me, smirking, and repeat:  
"What the Fuck *is* Leprechaun hunting?"

## II

Driving home from prom isn't supposed to be an adventure—unless you somehow end up in Ohio. Realizing a wrong turn was made the four of us decided to retrace our route:

Turn left and then drive a few miles. Start talking about the whore-ish quality of the Prom Queen's dress.

Make a right turn and then another. Sing along with the radio.

The car stalls.

We look around, seeing that the road ends in a T, but what catches our eye is the dominating presence of a bright white church sign painted with candy apple red letters:

### **ADULTERERS GOD WILL TORTURE THEE**

As we all wait for the tow truck to come and rescue us from this town, more backwoods than our own, I can't help but wonder if someone got caught screwing the minister's wife.



### III

An hour-drive one-way and my brain is on autopilot. I listen to the radio; drowning my deafening thoughts desperate for anything to darken the flashes of your emaciated body now burned onto my retina.

Hallowed out cheeks that were once full. Bald-headed, though I remember your hair being thick and shiny. A body so frail a simple touch could shatter it. Your eyes were no longer lit by the fire that had radiated out of you; instead, you were dull and empty, just waiting to die.

*Surviving Cancer is a myth.*

This thought occupies the forefront of my mind. Even if you lived you would never be the same. Your hair might grow back, your body and face become full again, but the piece of you that had died, not even remission could revive that... and then I seen another sign:

#### **PENN FRIENDS COMMUNITY CHURCH**

**"SCIENCE ONLY GOES SO FAR  
THEN COMES GOD"**

I swallow it up. My mind momentarily quieted; preoccupied with this message. I had heard it before; was sure that it sprang from some great philosophical thinker. Imagine my surprise when I discovered it to be a Nicholas Sparks quote. Maybe the bible ran out of motivational sayings that day.

#### IV

Bright sunshine, warm on my skin; wind tearing through my open windows, creating chaos with my hair; music blaring as I drive. Serenity, that's what I find cruising down the open road.

Almost one year of sobriety down, but today is the true test. Conscious of being happy, despite the date, I employ every tool I possess so I will not slide into the pit of depression that will ultimately lead to me drowning in Rum.

Alcoholism cannot be cured.

It is after 6 and I am starting to believe that I will win. Forty-two times I thought about drinking but chose not to. Traffic is slow on this part of the road due the mass exodus of the local Catholic Church:

#### **Sign Broken: Message inside**

First thought; how is the sign broken? Second thought; what is the message? It's not until I begin to turn my car around, eager to learn the message that I think; well played, Minister, well played.



