

January Gill O'Neill – Five Poems



Feature Poet

Bathtub Graveyard

Past Pirate Adventure Family Fun Center
and the World's Largest Cedar Bucket,
past Dollar General and Cheepo Depot furniture,

past cul-de-sac communities tucked
behind stands of trees, the kudzu kingdoms
and cotton fields along the Purple Heart Highway,

I pull onto the gravel and wander this roadside spectacle:
abandoned troughs in a not-quite junkyard—a limbo,
a bathtub graveyard of cast-iron souls in perfect rows

under the hot rebel sun. Curious creatures
tipped onto their sides, their claw feet
stretched out like dragons.

The porcelain finishes rusted as red clay.
Relics once plumbed-in-place now filled
with stagnant water, ringed with grime lines

of dirt and dead skin cells. Hot and cold faucet handles
stripped or missing, their absence making faces at my face—
tub-spout frowns mimicking the giant O of surprise.

Oprah, who lived two hours from here in Kosciusko,
Mississippi until age 6, has a bathtub carved
in the shape of her body. She says “I spend my time looking

for the best possible bathtub a woman can buy.”
How she has learned to cradle her life with care.
I could not have guessed what waited around the curve

of my life: a field of ladyfingers. Giant single slippers.
Cots in a makeshift hospital next to a cemetery with a sign that says,
Desire is a WAY station between too much and too little.

Today I stop to listen to rusted ghosts—dirt to dirt—
iron hourglasses telling time against a long stretch of road
that will take me east or west, nowhere or home.

I Slept in John Grisham's Bed

A bed on stilts, queen sized, with a well
in the center I'd always roll into. White,
pilled sheets, threadbare and thinning.

I worked hard to earn that bed
and the room surrounding it—meaning,
I must have written words, once,

that meant something. Big wide windows
look onto a cluster of magnolias that never
lose their leaves. No blinds. I like to let the light in.

I imagine John Grisham plotting out a best-seller,
yellow legal pad in hand, kids like mine bouncing
on a mattress high enough to touch the ceiling fan.

This bed I have shared with many authors and lovers,
who also wrote words that meant something.
They slept here, loved here, too, on this bed

that scoots away from the wooden headboard
from too much movement. Can't help but laugh
at the bedroom door that does not lock,

sliding a chair in front of it for privacy,
or the attic we were afraid to enter,
the creak of the floorboards above our heads.

And when I'd think my big thoughts about the world—
time travel or black holes or God or death—I'd come
to the bed's blank page against the shimmer of skyglow.

--Oxford, MS

Axilla

My wing, my least attractive body part,
the one for which I cringe every time
I lift my arm to shave, or check in the mirror
for lumps. Warm hollow. Ruddy cave wall.
Pulled bark from an aged oak. It carries
the scar from my eighth year when I cut
my underarm on a metal fence playing
hide and seek. The mark that won't fade.

It's your favorite part of my body.
How you'd stretch my arm straight, run your hand
along the side of my chest, soft and unguarded.
You'd tell me how you liked *all of me*: the texture,
the stubble, the sweaty desire, the wild touch.

And for that moment, I believed.

Winter Silence

There's a hidden path shielded by brambles
and seagrass, bracketed by sand dunes and the tides.
In the brisk afternoon we walk toward the water.
The dog, unleashed, runs with abandon.
At high tide, I hear the presence of everything.
Not one thing is more important than the other:
the crow scavenging for shells, the young girl
taking pictures of the gray waves waiting for
the light's shortest glimmer. What calls us here
as if we were born to the water: waves crashing
the rocks, the pulse in the ear against the slight
tremble of air on this quiet stretch of shore.
I come to grieve all the small losses.

Girlhood

They camp in July's backyard greenscape,
11 teenage boys and my daughter for the dozen.

A hard breeze shuffles through summer's playlist.
Heat lightning. Deer tracks. Night swimming

in a pool that swallows the stars like infinity.

These boy scouts pitch tents, start their own fires
then put them out. Same old séance—cell phone
flashlight tag, low power mode, cold pizza night.

When will they see her as a girl? Bare branches for arms,
the secret backs of knees, wet skin glistening in low light

on her necklace of wildflowers and mouse bones, hive and forge,
midnight between two gloamings, sheltered by a wooden fence

while inside: ivy, lush and verdant,
the understory keeping the animals away

January Gill O'Neil is an associate professor at Salem State University and the author of *Rewilding* (2018), *Misery Islands* (2014) and *Underlife* (2009), all published by CavanKerry Press. From 2012-2018, she served as the executive director of the Massachusetts Poetry Festival, and currently serves on the boards of AWP, Mass Poetry, and Montserrat College of Art. Her poems and articles have appeared in *The New York Times Magazine*, the *Academy of American Poets' Poem-A-Day* series, *American Poetry Review*, *Green Mountains Review*, *Poetry* and *Sierra* magazine, among others. The recipient of fellowships from the Massachusetts Cultural Council, Cave Canem, and the Barbara Deming Memorial Fund, O'Neil was the 2019-2020 John and Renée Grisham Writer-in-Residence at the University of Mississippi, Oxford. She lives with her two children in Beverly, MA.