

## Dirty Little Secrets Are Just Another Set of Facts

Grandmother tried to extract me from the womb with a metal hanger one year before the bellhop shot her in AC. Mom took acid. Ran around like a cartoon before jumping off the jetty. Drowned at thirty.

Cops pulled a train on a white officer. Grandpop was the only one arrested. *Oh, I wanted it, she said, but the coon wasn't invited.* Dogs found dad in the backseat of a junkyard jeep at fifty-five. Pushers called him *greedy*.

My children married white people. My aunt asked where I went wrong. I said, *Maybe they are trying to stay alive a few more generations.* I never judged her for her crimes or the dismantled gun in the wall.

Brother put his son in a trash bag. Proof of mens rea, the linchpin of the case spun from manslaughter to murder in the first degree. Buried him in the same sand where our small fingers had bustled under the boards to make castles.

Twenty-five years later, his trigger hands still shake, so how can I incubate in this ivory house? Write myself free? I am blood bound. I am a weapon: mom's dirty little secret, brown embryo born blue. Twisted hanger reshaped. Strange words made from wire.

## On Our Way Back from the Protest

The officer approaches. Keith keeps both hands  
on the steering wheel. Clicks his tongue

against his teeth six times—  
a tune of feigned assurance.

The trooper walks back to his car.  
Keith takes his hands off the wheel.

I am the first to speak. I ask if he thinks  
the cop is going to give us a ticket?

The man who answers, *I don't know*,  
is not my husband. He is not the man

who killed the wolf spider on the windowsill.  
Not the man who grabbed a snake by its tail,

carried its body, wiggling to the ravine. Not the man  
who beat down a thief twice his size in our home.

Not Keith who danced at the end of the protest  
like it was a Sunday in New Orleans' Congo Square.

Or the man who arranged hydrangeas  
tenderly, steadily beside his father's casket.

No. Tonight, he becomes Freddie,  
Breonna, Botham, George.

Eyes the cop through the rearview mirror.  
Puts both hands back on the steering wheel.

Drums the leather with his thumbs.

Today My Cousin Brenda Would Have Been 50

The woman we called *Morning* limped  
down Ellington Street, asking for a dollar.

Everyone knew it was just a matter of time.  
Government wasn't an enabler. No Narcan

to resurrect zombies. Folks dropped,  
leaving brown puddles. Heroin ate people.

Every day a little thinner, disappearing  
into clothes like ghosts. Till they were ghosts

on Ellington forever, their nothingness enough  
to change moods of stray cats and dogs.

Morning would be no different. Last time  
I saw her, she swallowed her teeth

before she opened her mouth to speak,  
*You remember me?*

Did she mean from yesterday?  
I searched her eyes, tried to look inside her.

*We used to eat crayons together.* I saw something  
familiar. Delightful. Plates full of crayons.

Her sitting in a yellow romper.  
Legs, hardwood floor-brown.

Two front teeth missing.  
Mouth full of colored wax, laughing.