

## **STUNT**

*Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and the Lord drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night and made the sea dry land, and the waters were divided.*

*-Exodus 14:21*

I pored over this good book  
a weathered catalog of men  
desperate to win  
their own unsteady kingdom  
studied a theology born  
of desire, flesh and fire  
read each psalm over and over  
and found power singing in each word  
child, this is what men want:  
to be made a sorcerer  
eyes rolled back  
knees dropped to sacred ground  
to speak in tongues  
visions of a burning bush  
magicked lions suborned  
in a red eclipsed rapture  
a world shuddering  
to balance  
with your wonder  
baby, we all want to be marvelous  
that's what I sell:  
a chance to stunt

### **Nellie tells her children a parable**

I grew up nursed on commerce - my mama and daddy  
lived in cotton fields, would come home  
enter that door and I'll be damned if they weren't enthroned  
in that fruit's white, its dander floating soft and stubborn in the night air  
everything but pliant. we'd never be rid of it, had to worship  
what each blessed weeping ounce gave. we all have to have a master  
I just wanted to be my own. I knew Jesus would not come  
no matter what my daddy said - so I built a kingdom like cotton:  
soft, brutal and irresistible, another skin trade, so wrapped  
around the heart of Natchez, to kill me would mean to kill a country

## Nellie speaks on original sin

late summer nights are spent  
exhaling hot smoky circles into  
mississippi black my girdle pressed  
straight into the curl of my ready belly  
as insolent as a man's hand  
I love rough familiarity the blues hot throb  
I get from even the pastor's measured  
smile when I trespass again into the church's  
doors spend hours dreaming of what just  
the promise of soft flesh can drive a good girl  
to do why feign ignorance at what's between  
our thighs the joys a lazy hour can bring  
honeyed hushed rocking  
rushing a lover into the very wick of me  
any bible worth its salt will tell you  
my want is wicked yet I'll go back  
taste eve's apple a thousand times  
kneel before her abashed in praise  
a *bad* woman flushed in grace

## heartache

I tell you there is no word yet made in 1930  
to speak what my eyes witness. I love nothing more  
than my hands, because I know what they do. I love  
my limbs because they have taken me here  
to this ground. I love where my body came from  
even the fields that yoked me and my parents in  
bloodless thrall. the scythes dug deep in mud  
that never harvest a month's rent or a full belly  
no matter the overseer's scale.

I've become obsessed with accounting  
the ease tables give to my life, how one rape  
can give way to a thousand. numbers carry  
the burden of what is unspeakable:  
the money it takes to live, the acres  
my grandmother was promised.

no matter the sum, the answer is  
always the same:  
there is no good white man. no man that can't  
be spoiled by power, left rank and molding  
after devouring what little of our bodies  
are left, their open mouths spooling for more.

here are the spells I've learned to stay alive:

always keep money under your

mattress, bury gold where fire can't scorch

it, sweep the floors with salt, teach your girls to

read, smile when those white folks come, grinning

alligators thirsty for war, feed your dead good liquor,

and pay those bills meekly

shuffling feet on dusty floors, head bowed

eyes focused on the ground you built

trusting in no heaven but your own

## **cabal**

after the men leave  
their gaits drowsy and spent  
we gather in the porch's shadow

and for one purpled hour  
we glory in the day:  
magic mazes from our

scalps, blue magic  
slick in its parts, marvel at  
our own quick beauty

some call us witches  
swear we use the time  
to drum up new spells

love: leave us  
and our lawless flesh  
never ask the magic

its source, you'd find  
it ugly, simple and plain  
whatever our unruly hearts desire

does it drive you mad  
that we palm our own pleasure  
can whip our own bodies

into a frenzied honeyed  
dark. a mass of bees  
building and building

into weird splendor  
we are the women  
no good god fearing man

will ever claim to know  
only yearn for, as you  
wrap your arms around

your wife, smell her neck

the yeast of tamed skin rising