

# Fruit Flies and Parrots

English Honors Thesis by Meg Franklin

**PRESERVATIVES**

- The Skull of The Christ Child ... 2  
Old Dog Lucy ...3  
Dodo in Papier-Mâché ... 4  
Poplar Hill Road ...5  
Wonder Wine ...6  
Dorothy Virginia Byrd ...7  
Abandoned Refrigerator ...8  
Charlie, Churchill's Parrot ...9

**GRENADINE**

- Discord and the Cord ... 11  
Ear Piercing ... 12  
Monthly or I End this Poem with a Period ... 13

**FAMILY PHOTOGRAPHS**

- To Photograph ... 15  
Tap Dancing Daddy ... 16  
My Mother on Christmas Morning, 1956 ... 17  
Dot's Camera ...18

**FRUIT FLIES AND PARROTS**

- Fruit Flies and Parrots ... 20  
Old Men on Porches ...21  
Wired ... 22  
Sammy ... 23  
Fruit Flies and My Mother ... 24  
Madame Laurent in Peacetime ... 25

## Preservatives

## The Skull of the Christ Child

Forget Judas's betrayal, a cityful of jeers,  
the itch of thorns against his temples,  
blood in his eyes, nails in his hands.

Instead, still smudgy from the manger,  
all wrapped up in swaddling clothes,  
imagine Jesus Savior to no one,  
rather prey to Herod's soldiers,  
or some biblical disease, drowning,  
the stable oxen's gore, hunger, the cold.

And I wonder by what rules does this abide.  
A grown man must die at Calvary,  
so that he can rise from the ground,  
so we all can claim our divine dowry,  
see the gate's steel lock turn to cloud.

In the corner of a tiny church in Tuscany,  
I saw baby Jesus's skull on a velvet pad.  
Pay a small donation and you can kneel  
on the tile and squint in the dimness  
to make out his soft spot dried like a sea sponge,  
three baby teeth budding along his bottom jaw,  
the ghostly halo the pithy votive flames project  
against the ripples in the reliquary glass.

## Old Dog Lucy

The strands of Lucy's coat  
socked my feet with ash  
for sliding fast on linoleum.  
My heart would work itself high-speed,  
pump blisters like a mud pot,  
until I saw her balding belly  
heave its gravel strewn breaths.  
I'd bend to her, kiss her gray head  
twenty-seven times exactly,  
whisper "I love you, Lucy",  
and skid myself back outside  
to claim my ghost man on third.

When my mother hadn't vacuumed,  
Lucy's fur thatched across the small crater  
she had smudged with her mucky coat  
on my pink carpet. The imprint  
looked as if a glass of chocolate milk  
had spilled with a meteor's impact  
to sear the rosy fabric  
and flat cocoa curds behind.  
There by my bed, in a nightlight's glow,  
I would check her stomach for movement,  
clutch one of her chalk stick legs,  
kiss her greasy head just enough.

Lucy died in my dirt driveway  
from old age,  
not from twenty-six kisses  
instead of twenty-seven,  
the obsession had faded, no tears even.  
I'd seen the boys smear  
fireflies across their cheeks and foreheads,  
helped them stomp a colony of ants,  
laughed when they salted a deckful of slugs.

### **Dodo in Papier-Mâché**

Yellowed newsprint peeks  
beneath popped terra bubbles,  
fissures, a stroke of thin paint –  
tips for spring cleaning,  
an update on Watergate,  
a strip of the Dow Jones.

Its belly wrinkled, naked text  
as if the child who made it knew  
she'd dabbed too much paint -  
slathered the newspaper strips  
too wet with flour and water,  
and blown the balloon body  
too round, too penguin-like,  
for the bird ever to take flight.

Though wing-green drips into  
tailfeather-yellow, it hovers  
below the ceiling of the study  
and a haggard red pipe cleaner,  
its eyes wandering with the huff  
of the near-by air-conditioning  
from the spine of a Yeats volume,  
to a postcard from Mt. Rushmore,  
to a pencil and age-glazed eraser.

## Poplar Hill Road

I took a walk down my windy road,  
sheeted in dry leaves, twigs, grit.  
Under there, in places I'd kicked bald,  
I found a totaled Nascar toy, a butter knife,  
an emerald, a bird skeleton –  
all embedded in the asphalt, fossilized fast  
in its blackness by a thousand tires' sleepy weight.

The bird was large,  
a pterodactyl, a buzzard,  
killed fast while feasting –  
its tar-topped table still tacky.

The car I could nearly pry from the road.  
The racer hadn't survived.  
The child who let it slip from his fingers  
bawled to see it go.

The emerald was three carats too large to be real.  
I tried to pick it free, but the hungry ground  
held it fast.

And the butter knife – its handle floral,  
its blade just dulled enough to dent butter.  
It had dropped from a picnicker's wooden basket –  
an almost visible swirl of ants preserved at its tip.

## Wonder Wine

*Make your own wine in thirty-one days time.*

I shrieked when I saw it  
like a girl who has broken a well-painted nail.  
A top-of-the-line kool-aid  
boxed tight in hand-sized black cardboard.  
A yard sale sticker penned "\$2.50"  
in an old person's jagged scrawl  
adhered to the box's back.

Under the dust of the box gleamed  
three spotlighted glasses of wine,  
one pink, one yellow, and one tomato red -  
the colors garishly transparent  
as if glazed to imitate stained glass.

I had to buy it, wake it up, watch and smell it age.  
I paid a tall lady who claimed the wine would rival  
most any vintner's for pennies of the cost.  
and a fraction of their labor, a fraction of their time.  
She slipped me her card, parroted a dentured smile,  
and said, "Have a ducky, ducky day."

I churned up the Wonder Wine -  
emptied the packets of grape must and yeast  
into a plastic cooler with sugar and water.  
I heaved it to the top of the kitchen cabinet  
and thickly taped three notes that read "Don't Touch."

Alone in the kitchen, thirty one days later,  
I opened the ready wine.  
It floated up with the nostril clutch of rubbing alcohol.  
And there were fruitflies, like tissue caught in eddies,  
I dunked and swooped, picked the wine free of them,  
of small seeds cauled by wings,  
and dabbed the smear of their preserved bodies  
on the kitchen counter in rows to dry.



## Dorothy Virginia Byrd

First she'd waved at Franklin Roosevelt –  
she by the tracks, he on the back platform of the train.  
Then, year by year she changed her story:  
he'd stepped from the platform and waved at her,  
blown her a kiss, given her daddy a cigar.  
Finally, he'd *walked* to her,  
patted her head, and said, "Hello, little girl  
with the blonde curls. What's your name?"

Dot, and she'd had straight brown hair –  
dyed her entire adult life, curled too,  
so that by the time I knew her,  
it was Easter grass, stiff and yellow.  
And a biting cloud of Aqua Net  
surrounded her brittle waves  
like the foggy light around the body  
of the Virgin on a prayer card.

She couldn't define cryogenics,  
but she kept a piece of her wedding cake  
and the first eggs my father ever dyed,  
both now technicolored in her kitchen freezer.  
She gathered Cokes,  
a six pack with Bear Bryant on the bottles' sides,  
the fluid reeking like formaldehyde.  
And hair, she'd saved that as well –  
I found a lock – dry and lonely,  
honey brown and straight,  
tied round with a tired pink bow.  
It lay on a bier of cotton in a paper box,  
a yellowed label beside it.  
I held it close to read, "Dorothy Virginia, 1933."  
I laughed a little, knew she'd planned  
the quiver of the ribbon under my nostrils,  
hoped my lower lip would mimic its move.

## Abandoned Refrigerator

My oldest parishioner,  
the unsaved Miss Jane,  
has broken her hip,  
has grounded herself in the house  
that smells of browned roses.

*Brother Clay, strawberries and whipped cream.*  
I open the door of her Frigidaire,  
rub at the thighs of my jeans and kneel down.

A cantaloupe bleeds out the cup of its belly.  
Salsa sits in fogged glass five years expired.  
Lettuce liquefies, the color of grass stain,  
the stink of mowed lawn, a cold nose's drool.  
Strawberries' black hairs wither frizzy green.  
The lard in the antique rose patterned teacup  
copies the shade of a blue-eyed milkmaid's cheek.  
A hard fruit fly burrows a pock into its surface.  
Balls of ground chuck slouch Saran-wrapped on the  
rippled crisper's floor. They wear skirts of bile.

So I go down to the cellar, up to the freezer.  
Pick free canned beets and icy blueberries,  
pour a bowl of each, wonder which she will choose.

### **Charlie, Churchill's Parrot**

The keepers say if they coax her,  
offer a cracker or a handful of seeds,  
the old, feather-ruffling vehemence returns.  
She claws the air with a knobby foot,  
flaps her blue wing akimbo,  
and frees a glass-scratch squall,  
cursing Hitler, the Nazis too.  
And if they pet her molted belly, coo,  
let fall another cracker past her eye  
she'll feign anger, speak again,  
dredge up another curse  
for the Nation of Aryans.  
She'd been part of Churchill's zoo  
of pigs, cats, swans, and lambs.  
The others a forgotten meal --  
an occasion for mint jelly,  
or a ham for dinner with the Queen.  
Some sit a stack of bones in rainy soil.  
But the macaw, a hundred and two years old,  
still squawks, wears a youthful coat  
of royal blue and gold. All her feathers,  
the ones she hasn't plucked,  
have the same taffeta sheen  
as on the day Churchill found her,  
tethered her to his round shoulder,  
taught her to enunciate "fuck."

# Grenadine

## Discord and the Cord

When Roy first saw his baby's face  
he couldn't hide his grimace  
so he declared, "We'll call the boy Ug."  
But Ug grew up able to peddle his photo,  
high priced, to a swarmful of girls after school.

Ug says that his son David's baby brain  
sat pure mush at the head of his bassinette  
until it congealed at four months like old gravy.  
In the mushtime he spoke his first word, "portfolio",  
which no one had said to him, not even the radio.

David claims his fetal child couldn't decide his sex.  
Six inconclusive sonograms, so David read up  
on hermaphrodite babies, considered a sex to pick,  
thought he'd have to choose until the instant  
before John, all male, pushed free with a kick.

When Mimi, Louisa, and I were born  
things went as planned – girls from the get go,  
heads firmly in place, small fine-looking babies.  
In her maternity ward bed, my mother dreamed  
none of us had ever separated, had ever let go,  
had ever let a doctor snip shining umbilical cords.  
Susan stood behind Mimi, radiant in old age,  
and behind her a long line of women,  
a proud set of Siamese octuplets,  
tongues Irish, dress antique, faces obscured.

## Ear Piercing

Each time my mother saw a toddler with earrings,  
she turned to me and whispered, "So tacky."  
When I turned thirteen, ear-piercing age,  
I asked her to return the small pearls --  
refusing the pain, the chance of infection,  
a place for metal, something inhuman,  
like stranded bullets inside my body.

I looked to my grandmothers--  
both with wrinkled girls' ears,  
coy lobes, and a drawer full of clip-ons.

Now, I dream of men,  
perfect men, who call me virgin ears  
and come to me with jeweled studs,  
the stuff of overflowing treasure chests,  
bobbing on posts in small velvet boxes.  
And though I've thought for years  
my husband would admire my naked ears,  
I've considered giving them up to that gun.

**Monthly or I End this Poem with a Period**

*(in the voice of the actor who asked Annie Hall to touch his heart with her foot)*

Your liquid maroon rusts onto cotton monthly,  
the silky ease of that flow smells like pennies,  
aged with the touch of twenty-eight hands.  
When did your grenadine cycle begin?  
Did you bike to the drugstore and proudly pay  
for your kotex with change? Or did you cry  
into your mother's menopausal breast, bemoaning  
the loss of spanking white panties?

Now, you are a woman, my woman.  
I love you, your sanguine shower.  
You let me plug your ruddy flesh  
with an orange packaged Tampax.  
Heavy flow, the box said and the moment  
loosed a Red Sea's torrent in my heart.  
Yesterday, my love, I pricked my finger  
and touched a rose petal of mercury  
you left to glisten on our linoleum tile –  
the sweet droplet seared me like a fiery ember  
and with that, my love, we became blood sisters!

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# Family Photos

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## To Photograph

To photograph a beach at sunset –  
a dayglo marble dipping inch  
by cold inch into the long side of a pool –  
misty mountains in another state –  
the side spray of a garden hose  
against a square of lumpy lawn –  
or a row of cherry trees at bloom –  
laminated cotton candy  
tied tautly on skinny arms –  
is to waste so much.

Instead, keep your mother, twenty-five,  
her long legs submerged, her pink swimsuit red  
to a line midway up her pregnant stomach,  
her fingers just touching the water's flatness –  
watch her smile at your father behind his lens.  
Take your father, middle aged and sunburned,  
his white t-shirt grass-stained,  
his thumb against the hose head,  
reviving a crisp poinsettia  
he'd domesticated that January –  
see his gaze, too stoic, too intent, to imagine  
he hadn't seen you beside him snapping your Nikon.  
Hold your tiny child, standing below a wooden clown,  
whose long pointer finger doesn't reach her head,  
her pink face glazed with snow-cone and tears,  
a good-for-all-rides bracelet tied above her clinched fist –  
notice a frown more exaggerated than the clown's smile,  
aimed sharp into the black camera's laughing eye.

## Tap Dancing Daddy

My brother and I thought the tapping was a rumor:  
he'd denied it, said he would refuse to dance that way,  
but there he is poster sized, framed in browned matting,  
"Saxon Follies, Temple Theatre, May 28, 1956."

A clogger in a citified disguise,  
and four years old, maybe five,  
he stands in ballet's third position –  
fingers gripping either side of a clip-on bowtie.  
Looking father enough for a flea circus,  
an ant farm, or an organ grinder monkey,  
he wears tight black pants,  
a short-sleeved dress shirt,  
a too-big cummerbund -  
tourniquet for an adult thigh -  
and pointed patent-leather tap shoes.

Below a honey swoosh of forehead hair,  
he smiles, his eyes soft and aimed to the side.  
sending a telepathic "Mother look at me!"  
in a small country twang I can still hear.

### **My Mother on Christmas Morning, 1956**

My three-year-old mother stands in her white mary janes  
barely taller than the fat plastic Santa Claus  
that leans behind her in black and white.  
She looks straight at the camera.  
Gripping his belt with a mittened hand,  
he looks tongue-out at a small doll  
my mother holds over her shoulder.  
The Virgin and Jesus, porcelain figures,  
whose eyes she feels searing her neck,  
sit enthroned on the television box behind Santa –  
Mary holds a clean book in her hands  
and the Christ Child seems to read along.  
There's a train in front of my mother, large enough to hold her,  
large enough to devour the picture's foreground.  
Around it, is a velveteen bow larger than her head.  
She has a cheap doll and one expensive, hulking train  
meant for pedaling around the neighborhood scab-kneed  
like the dump truck her father gave her the year before.  
The Virgin, from her high perch, can see my mother  
as well as she sees her book. She observes, as Santa almost can,  
the downward curve of my mother's small mouth,  
the fullness of her eyes, the stiff clutch she gives her doll,  
how the sash and crinoline of her dress seem to wilt.  
Mary doesn't report her ungrateful, remembers how  
Joseph relaxed when she repeated their child would be a boy.

## Dot's Camera

*Boo boo boo I'm Silly Billy  
Say Cheese  
I'll pay you a dollar  
One, two, three!*

And she raised her thick fingers  
one brittle pink party hat at a time,  
snapped.

We thought they must have come back wrong.  
Nearly each of the twenty-four –  
my eyes rolled, nose flared.  
John's fingers devil horns for my head.

When those rolls began  
she thought of the old pictures:  
me smiling in the white fringe  
cowgirl boots she'd given me.  
John laughing on the lap  
of a polyester-suited Santa.

She let the cheese mold,  
spent the dollars,  
let Silly Billy run away,  
neglected her nails,  
forgot our names.  
In her room, we found  
three shoe boxes of film,  
each roll's perforated flap  
sucked tight into its shell.

Fruit flies are small insects that are often found in large numbers around rotting fruit. They are also known as Drosophila melanogaster. These flies are used in scientific research because they have a short life cycle and are easy to breed in the laboratory. They are also used in genetic studies because they have a small genome and many genes that are similar to those found in humans. Fruit flies are also used in the study of aging and neurodegenerative diseases. In the laboratory, fruit flies are kept in vials and fed a special diet. They are then used in various experiments to study the effects of different genes and environmental factors on their development and behavior.

## Fruit Flies and Parrots

## **Fruit Flies and Parrots**

The parrot's cage is all littered in flecks,  
the fuzz of lost plumage, some tawny seed,  
small bugs in swarm, strips of newspaper text,  
smear'd droppings, the pulp of a tangerine.  
She's an eighty-seven year old macaw,  
her feathers blue and gold, her tongue a slab  
that hollows melons to an insect's pall,  
her eyes sentries searching a cracker to grab.  
Ten-hour-old fruit flies climb the cage's rungs,  
feast on the fumes of the bird's citrus food,  
and leave an egg film in the places they've clung.  
Their wings, like sun in oil, shine metallic hues.  
*Pretty bird, pretty bird* the parrot cackles,  
while silently the flies scale the core of an apple.

## Old Men on Porches

When the thermometers top sixty-five,  
I've seen the old men of Poplar Hill Road  
abandon the inside and head to their porches  
in far-spaced herds, as slow as fattened steers.  
In lawn chairs or swings they sit as if in a trance  
making curds of tobacco, beef jerky, and peanuts.  
I've seen them, with their big black eyes, peer  
through cars' side windows for the glance  
or the one fingered salute that begs them to raise  
a two-musled wave. Their shirts are cotton flannel  
and their caps manmade, so by supper-time  
the flannel grows damp, smells like wet animal  
and the polyester reeks like gunpowder, acrid and tart.  
I think of how not one has ever smiled at me.  
But, they're old men on porches, cattle waiting it out,  
a congenital wither to your pumping heart.

## Wired

He grins back,  
and I wish I hadn't smiled  
at the gray-haired man  
who bikes beside me in the gym.  
His teeth send me into a pedaling frenzy.  
I double my RPMs.  
I set a calorie burning record.  
I sweat my pink shirt red.  
He has braces – top and bottom –  
a tight cage on each tooth  
rubber banded in a blue  
that complements his eyes.

I thought of the sideshow-bound kid  
who sat behind me in Pre-Algebra.  
If I had to pass him paper  
or – God forbid – be his partner,  
I'd take a pencil-sharpening break.  
I'd not look up from my book.  
I'd fake sick.  
He had a full red beard,  
a rusty Brillo pad shredding from his chin.  
He liked to caress it.

I always hoped the bearded boy's father  
would give him a shaving lesson  
some morning after Trix and 'toons.  
And as I rode my bike now  
I imagined the wired man  
standing tall in a Polaroid taped  
to his dentist's bulletin board  
just below the Cavity Free Club.  
He wears a slick new smile  
and a balloon string on his wrist.



## Sammy

He kicked me,  
threw a bowl of popcorn in my face,  
ordered me to "Go away!",  
tossed my good shoes in his pond,  
jerked my car into neutral as I drove,  
locked me out of his house.

At the end of the summer,  
he told me he loved me.  
After that I noticed  
how his tilted eyes  
followed a rainbow of light  
from his bicycle's reflector  
on the panels of his garage door  
as if he could eat it without chewing.  
I saw him stand by his father's chicken pen  
with large diamonds of light shining  
on his spiderman boxers and round tummy  
-- his flat face lit tight to the sides  
at seeing the pen's only brown chick.

When I left him in August,  
he stood at his garage door howling my name,  
pounding his fists into the rain,  
telling his father to "go away" --  
a melodramatic scene with a ten-year-old leading man.

I think he forgot to cry  
the moment he saw Pokemon on tv,  
but I liked his grand farewell.  
It was the most flattering I've seen.

## Fruit Flies and My Mother

She said yesterday,  
"My side of the family has incredible longevity."  
Tonight she slaps fruit flies with a damp dishrag.  
They drop on the kitchen tile like lead shavings  
as her gasped beats pre-punctuate their fall.  
"Yes" -- "Ahah" -- "Die, sucker!"  
She says she has no idea why they come here,  
to her kitchen, all of the dishes clean,  
the trash bag empty.

### Madame Laurent in Peacetime

After we'd eaten the scalloped potatoes,  
the grandmother scraped the glass pan for five minutes,  
dished the burned scabs to her mouth,  
and chewed them.

Then, with her eyes closed,  
she drank the sweat left from our custard  
out of the serving bowl.

I thought I could keep up with her.  
I made it a game to save myself from reprimands  
I'd understand only through inflections.

I laughed when I wrote postcards with the pen  
she'd scavenged from its grave on the beach,  
when I switched off her chandelier  
if only walking to the kitchen and back,  
when I used her toilet though long unflushed,  
and when I wiped up my tiniest pâté crumbs with bread  
and ate them, just like she did.

When she excused herself to the kitchen  
to eat bones,  
I quit playing my game.  
I couldn't finish a chicken –  
didn't want my laugh tuned  
to the crack of a skeleton against old-lady teeth.