Three
My name is Beautiful Barbara
and I live in a box. Once
I lived outside, but I
couldn’t get off my leash.

Like sheep to the slaughter,
like Jews to the ovens,
I leave my mother’s thin arms,
a Southern girl chloroformed.
Better to live in the ground than sin.

My trousseau is red flannel,
a sweater for warmth. "The light
is here, food there, an alarm button
in case anything goes wrong."
Now I lay me down to sleep.

I hear screws twist. Habits,
children fall like dirt
onto the lid of my coffin.
Stupid, I lie here and dream
of stubby fields, running, running.

The wood is hard against my bones,
cold needles my feet. I suck
at drafts and fumble for the button.
The alarm breaks off in my hand.
Dear God, my name is Beautiful Barbara
and I live in a box.
The Exhibitionist

We are carnival freaks
you and I. My priapism
hides behind soft lips
a phantom limb engorged
with secret dreams. There
you stand, knowing somehow
I must drive this way.
I see you. Your jet of come
glitters in the sun like
broken glass, your eyes
rivet mine. Yes, I am
your sister, turned inside
out, dark caves glistening.
So often you visit my nights
with your soft look
your one-eyed monster.
Eating

is the only bodily function we can do in polite company, not tooth or nose picking, hawking up globs, scratching butts, balls, labia, inspecting the contents of any body crevice gleaned with a fingernail. But there are rules: eating must be done discretely, mouth closed, no talking. Remember, farting is not allowed, even among friends. The wine, the coffee, the tasty chewables we swallow must soon make a private splash in the toilet, as secret as the rut-humping sex we do with others—or alone—behind closed doors. So all that’s left is to sit up straight, one hand in my lap, trying not to cram in the good stuff, like the animal I am.
How long since that man tailed me through a parking lot, his gaze fixed on my legs? I thought of him last week when sex sparked in a colleague’s eyes, fed by my breasts taut against fabric. I had almost forgotten the power that lights men’s eyes. In America, a woman over fifty, like a cozy couch, escapes notice.

Oh, whistles ring from passing cars, and drivers’ hormones throb with rap’s bass thump, until they see my face, their mother’s face. Still, friends’ husbands squeeze me too tight, like a taste of Swiss chocolate. Older men look twice, for a moment forgetting wives and progeny, silver-backed apes near their end.

But in Paris, young men’s eyes caress, their smiles glide over me like silk. My hostess tells me, “Here in France we have a tradition: a woman teaches a friend’s son about love.” Is that why she leaves me alone with her towering child? In morning sun his stubble gleams black, the whites of his eyes shine blue as breast milk. Fine hairs on his hands catch light, and he turns his gaze on me.
I wear chunky rubber-soled shoes, a pea-green coat
I bought at the Kaufhaus, a scarf twisted around
my neck like the locals. Give me credit. Not many
Americans try your punishing Prussian vocals.
I chew on your taffy words, cough up strings
of the stuff with Bach or ach, while goo blocks
my sinuses. I’ve learned to pretzel sentences till verbs
kiss nouns at the back door and spit consonants
like tacks until they blister the tip of my tongue,
yet my accent stays as flat as Hamburg’s horizon.
Still you spurn me with a sideways glance
and answer my questions in perfect English.
When we meet over glasses of beer, you tempt me
with glimpses of pale Nordic flesh. Yet little do
you know how I restrain myself from popping
you one, you, a strutting peacock, sneering
at my stories’ rose-colored endings. I ask myself,
too, Why don’t I stay where I belong?
Your garbled verbiage was going to be my ticket
to the big picture, but now I’m hooked on the misery,
whipping myself nightly with knotted cords of verbs,
bleeding in a hair shirt of nouns’ uncertain gender.
When we dance, you press me to your chest, Mein
Liebes, and whisper, “Aggressive American woman.”
Husband Shaving

Bouncing up the stairs
I imagine a hard curve
of hip. He stands naked
a jet of lather on his palm.
Paths of pink satin gleam
cut through foam. Biceps bunch
as he feels for strays.
I think how my circling hands
will sift curls on his chest,
cradle soft cups of seed,
my hardening nipples sweep
his smooth back. I know
he will turn, his mouth
will search me, leave trails
of white. Before I reach
the bathroom door, my legs
dissolve, soap in water.
A woman wears a black leather hood so tight that it shrinks her brain, flattens her face. Her chin juts over squared shoulders, hands rest on hips, her lower half cut off by frame. Steel bolts pierce her long brown nipples. She stares at me through slits in the hood as if she is ignoring the hypodermic needles threaded through the skin of her outer arms at precise intervals like tin soldiers marching, their razor tips pressing out ruby drops.

I imagine her: barely a woman, she kneels before an altar, offering the white nape, her shaved head, as Chinese girls hold out their feet to be bound. She promises to love and obey, accepting, as the laces tighten, a man’s promise to protect. He keeps her safe, her skull squeezed to fit house and babies, safe from demons of choice, unruly desire.

Behind the hood, her cheeks bunch in a smile. She proudly wears the medals earned by decades with one man. Wired for pleasure, she is chained by years of regular orgasms gotten the way she likes best, to babies pushed out below her frame, the gilt house her man has built. If she could speak, I would ask her: How has my long marriage marked me? Do my wounds glisten like yours?
When I was twenty-five I stared at skin sagging over the eyes of another nurse, more than twice my age, and vowed I’d never allow anything so sloppy happen to me. I sucked in my gut, ran a rat maze of daily miles, banked orgasms against the day when men would turn away in the neverland of menopause.

So who is that woman in the latest family photo? Her lids droop worse than those of my early colleague. The nose, the hair are mine, yet a sneaky side view reveals an accordion neck never seen in the makeup mirror. I glimpse Age creeping around the corner on rubber-soled shoes, hoping to rob this woman of all she holds dear.

But I have a surprise for him. I don’t need old tricks of tight skin. My power comes from a head crammed with knowing, a body proud of its years. I smile when a young colleague, her skin like wedding china, stares at my earned wrinkles. I can almost hear her silent oath.

A woman on Cybil, a sitcom, explains why she looks so young: “The plastic surgeon has cut away enough loose skin to make a small fat person.”
My Husband Retires

I’ve counted down the years on my fingers, now the day I’ve dreaded has come— your liberty, my chaos. Thick blonde hair and a flat belly prove you too young, yet you pocket the pension, a lump sum radioactive with possibilities. All I have to do is nod: you would drag me to dusty Alabama, a farm by a pond of jumping bass, a log cabin in Montana, windows blinking at the Beartooth Range, a beach house on the tenth hole of nowhere. “Where do you want to go?” I say. “If you knew me, you wouldn’t have to ask.” With money that must last forever, we fly to Ireland. A week in the car, our eyes numbed by rocky beauty, talk dwindles to a thin line of spittle. In a pub a man says he never locks a door. “I love it here,” you say, raising your pint to the farmer in manure-smeared boots.

Later we stand in a forty-mile wind one step from the edge at the Cliffs of Moher. The sea boils six hundred feet below. The writer in me imagines the story, a mystery—the shove to a shoulder, the waiting rocks—but I wrap my arms around your solid waist as we look out toward America. I know now where you would live out our years—not in Montana or Alabama—but the fifties where housewives vacuum in heels, men doff fedoras, and I am safe, here in the nineties.
Admiring the order of its plated shell, I watch a turtle’s plodding progress through the backyard impatiens bed. Intent on gaining a spot of moist shade, the turtle inches along, ignoring nearby hammering. In the garage my husband clears out detritus of twenty years—scattered hammers and screws, bits of board, empty boxes.

He’s been at it for days now, only stopping for a beer, the odd meal. Garbage cans overflow. Shelves appear, tailored for paint cans, electrical gear, and his father’s old gizmos. Giveaways pile up where his car used to park. At midnight I peek out to tell him good-night, but, as if meeting a deadline, he stays up to sort rusty nails.

I rise early to pounding. A new rack for folding chairs juts overhead. Once-jumbled tools, now ordered like a tray of surgical instruments, lie in pristine rows. Until months ago he wore a captain’s stripes, commanding an airborne ship. He began as an ace in an orange jumpsuit, skimming the desert floor at five hundred miles an hour, immortal under the dome of an attack bomber.

His bride, I stood beside a runway watching him fly touch-and-go landings, my body vibrating from engine noise, bathed in hot exhaust, knowing that night I would sleep with a jock Marine. Thirty-five years later, he salutes the ground crew on his last flight and walks away forever from his hero’s aura. Now he structures a new life, making his house as orderly as that turtle’s neat shell.
“What would you like to do?” he asks.
“A long stroll on the Burren,” I say.
And so I get my way; he trudges, back rounded. “Pretend you’re playing golf,” I tell him. I know he hates walking not done on fairways. Once a Marine, any exercise must have purpose.
Shoulders of silver stone rise over Europe’s western arm. From crevices where oceans once flowed, alpine blooms and tropical flora spring. Genetians wink brilliant blue eyes, purple orchids on two-inch stems beg to be picked. I dare to break stride, to look a sunny primrose in the eye, touch a tiny velvet fern. He checks his watch, taps his toe. “We’ve walked forty minutes.” “Just a little farther,” I say, “around that bend.” “We’ll walk till you can’t take another step.” Smiling, I take the lead and pick up the pace. I’d almost forgotten how much he loves me.
We stood at the altar so long ago, as if at Mount Katahdin in Maine, starting at the wrong end of the Appalachian Trail, too young to worry about hunger or bears, tipped groundward by backpacks loaded with useless gear. We have slogged over boulders, creek beds, thankless mountains, looking only at our trudging feet, to break open before an occasional vista with the world opened up at our boots. Sometimes you take the lead, other times I do—until we can hardly remember anything but this trail. Losing sight of each other for hours, one of us, breathless, always catches up, happy the sight of a familiar shape means we are not lost, at least from each other. But now we are on the downhill slope, almost to the trailhead at Springer Mountain where we will burst free in a meadow leading to hot showers and real beds. The sunlight through trees catches on your blonde hair, and suddenly I know I would choose what I chose so long ago, this life we trek together.
I know exactly what she looks like: big, perky breasts, tight, little waist and long blonde hair. This woman likes to cook. Every night she serves him a feast of fresh vegetables, fried chicken or steak, minus the lectures about arteries slamming shut. Her idea of fun is watching him ride his tractor around their farm in south Georgia where she sews and makes preserves when not entertaining his relatives. She knows all the rules of baseball and football, likes to watch golf on TV with him on Sunday afternoons.

He cannot hurt her feelings. His sexist jokes make her laugh until tears run. She squeezes a dollar until it stretches like rubber, never runs up the credit cards, not her. She dresses like a queen in last year’s clothes, always wearing the four-inch heels he loves. She won’t let him help in the kitchen and rubs his back when the dishes are done. She hates foreplay: she lies back, wet and ready in ten seconds flat, unless, of course, he prefers a blow job.

Poor guy. He got me instead. A city girl, who lives for books, art, long slow kisses, who hates cooking and sports. Once, when I was gone a month, friends gave him a blow-up doll. Now, when he walks in that door, his pink face full of hope, I want to be her, Marilyn Monroe in an apron, waiting for the details of his golf game. Instead I quietly leave him with his TV and newspaper so he can at least pretend.