

*Surrender*

To be baptized is to surrender –  
to let that long-haired honey cradle you  
as if you were a queen, or a prostitute.  
Or the girl I see at the pool  
who cannot lift herself  
and is therefore  
lifted from her wheelchair,  
held in someone's arms,  
put afloat in a pink tube  
like wet laundry waiting to be hung in the sun.  
Does the man waiting to be executed  
fear death more because he was never baptized? –  
As if the river could swallow our sins  
and keep them secret.  
As if buckets, or ladles of blessed water  
over the heads of babies and black beetles  
could keep them safe from stampede.  
As if algae-green water over the foreheads of baby snakes  
could make their venom a cerulean cure for madness.  
Plunging your head into, and drinking from,  
a birdbath, a horse trough. A squirt gun shot  
into the open mouth of the girl in the pool;  
a high-powered hose scouring the prison cell  
and the man balled-up in the corner  
looking like Picasso's *Crouching Beggar*, or  
*Woman Huddled on the Ground with a Child*.  
Painted from the sketches he made  
in Paris in the women's prison  
*St. Lazare* - where nuns served as warders  
and children were locked-in with their mothers.  
Hose *me* down, and up, into cavities and crevices –  
any place I might be hiding.  
Be it a full submergence:  
The waterfall under which carp spawn  
and teenagers tongue-kiss.  
Or the curved caves in the Yucatan  
where we jumped off the graffiti cliffs  
and swam with the floating bones of the sacrificed.  
Be it a full submergence:  
The mother held all five of her children  
down – one at a time in the bathtub.  
Same rationale as the priest: to save them from Satan.

To be baptized is to surrender –  
Give up your weapons and your ammunition.  
We know your slingshot is under your bed.  
Give it here. Now give us  
your pants and your light-up shoes.  
We may need your left ear and your liver.  
By the way, you can't keep your turtle –  
he may be carrying diseases.  
But do come with us to the Promised Land.  
There is a headless man there; he'll take you to the river.  
Only it's not a river anymore.  
Only she didn't let them back up:  
Paul shat in the water.  
Luke wanted his rubber duck.  
John bit her finger.  
Mary spoke her first word underwater.  
Noah struggled, still in his pajamas –  
reaching for the plug.

*A Down-by-the-River Poem*

I took a shit down by the river – hiding behind skinny oaks  
and the blossom-less stalks of horseweed and wood sage.  
But I didn't kill anyone.  
After only a few days here in the Carolina woods  
my hair is turning grey at the roots.  
Ancestors come from Ireland  
you'd think I'd know a song or two to sing  
in a bar with lumberjacks buying me lager –  
or a lament to sing with the woman playing the violin.  
Some of us like gypsies around the campfire.  
And that moon, that moon, that hit of light  
like being thrown down a flight of back porch  
steps, like touching an electric fence –  
like bleaching your best girlfriend's  
down-her-bony-back-black-hair  
starlight white. I long for your  
ejaculate in my mouth, on my breasts –  
between the folds and fabric of my exquisite flower.  
Call it a pussy or a cunt, or the shores of an eel-infested river.  
It's so fertile here they drink Pabst right out of the can  
and ferns are shedding spores in January.  
The only problem I see about relocating here  
is that they baptize each other in shapeless white sacks.  
And it's still the women who do all the laundering.  
The act itself is not demeaning –  
only do not mention spot removers or fabric softeners.  
Nor speak the sovereign syntax of cultural superiority  
pretending to be appalled, pretending to care, about the girls  
who open their mouths like milking machines on dairy farms  
or take it in the ass, all to remain immaculate until marriage.  
I wiped my ass with dry oak leaves and yes it scratched.  
But I haven't told you anything that could be  
admissible as evidence. I haven't told you anything  
terribly beautiful. So I'll tell you about the baby  
born nine-fingered under the new moon  
behind the pen of unbroken mules.  
And about the tree I saw there in the Carolina woods –  
a huge one hundred year-old blue spruce  
that laid down its life  
to become a bridge across the river.