

BRINEY, ELAINE M., M.F.A. *Knave Girl*. (2008)
Directed by Stuart Dischell. 23 pp.

This is a collection of poems exploring the terrain between memory and violence. It is deeply concerned with perceptions of unease in the natural world and the speaker often interrogates history by examining the subtext behind facts and artifacts from another time.

KNAVE GIRL

by

Elaine M. Briney

A Thesis Submitted to
the Faculty of The Graduate School at
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts

Greensboro
2008

Approved by

Stuart Dischell
Committee Chair

APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Committee Chair _____

Committee Members _____

Date of Acceptance by Committee

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Dear Friend	1
Driving Game	2
The First Year at Walden.....	3
Hector Leaves Andromache	4
Shachi	5
The Adopted Cat.....	6
Automatic Transmisson	7
Daibutsu	8
Egrets	9
Watching a Horror Movie at Home	10
Botulism.....	11
Old Sparky	12
Yellow Mama	13
The End of False Religion	14
Horseheads, NY	15
The World's Tallest Man at 12.....	16
The Caption	17
Ukai.....	18
Apparition	19
Poem Celebrating the Human Spirit.....	20
Womanlike.....	21

Triptych of Joan22

Dear Friend

The British had 100 pigeons staring at postcards of East Berlin and waiting for the moment it'd all go wrong. Those birds could explode at intervals from secret windows, hurtle towards the picture at the back of their minds, bacteria or a bomb strapped tight to one leg. Someone else's finger on the trigger.

That's how I'm feeling now: beady-eyed and hollow-boned. I'm afraid to send myself out. There is no one to give the signal.

But I have not asked after you, or how you feel. Maybe like a starved dog, landmine digging into your back as you nose for food under German tanks at Stalingrad. Maybe a bat in a Japanese attic. You know what you are tied to and never try to shake it, sleeping all day in a strange place. You dream of fire. Dream of home.

Driving Game

You kiss the palm of your hand
And slam it up against the gentle fall
Of fabric just half-stuck to the ceiling

for each single headlight that smears
across your windshield in the rain.
You kiss the palm of your hand

tenderly, but quick before the light
disappears, so is it any wonder
the fabric's just half-stuck to the ceiling,

bowing in by your head and dropping further
all the time, drifting like uneven breath?
You kiss the palm of your hand

even faster when there's no one but you and the one light
and the sound of your hand hitting hard into
the fabric just half-stuck to the ceiling.

But what will you do in this city, where people
take care of their cars? They will never let
you kiss the palm of your hand, and
slap the fabric back, just half-stuck to the ceiling.

The First Year at Walden

Watching one thief from his beanfield
he wondered about eating it raw,
ripping through its fur with his teeth.
But in the end he used a trap,
soaked the meat overnight in saltwater.
It wasn't satisfying – too musky, too heavy.
It was mostly an experiment.
He didn't do it out of hunger

They say he carried a woodchuck in his arms two miles
from his cabin and let it go. That wasn't kindness.
Some things we must pick up and abandon.

Hector Leaves Andromache

His features did not disappear
when he put on the bronze helmet.
They came off one by one after
he refused to remove it.
She dug tighter into his armor
as his ears slid down her back.
Nothing snagged in the folds of her dress.
They fell and vanished.

His spear hand is empty
but he still holds it up:
a loose fist.

We cannot see her face.
It is buried in his chest.

Shachi

We are outside Osaka Castle. Tell me it's a waste of money to go in. You took the tour a year ago, but nothing fit right: swords from different eras crammed in one case, the old rooms reconstructed in concrete and too small for your group. Your gangly American body got in the way of a hundred pictures. It's so expensive. You think we can eat lunch twice with that money, or take the train to Kyoto.

I'll believe you and we'll stay out here, jerking our heads like diving birds. We'll squint up at the afternoon sun, stealing glimpses of the golden dolphins at the corners of the roof. Then we'll look down at the row of silent businessmen fishing in rumpled suits. They'll cast lines into the moat for hours. I can already hear the carp splash, recaught as soon as they're released. Countless scars line their mouths.

The Adopted Cat

He cries at the edge of my bed at night
so I drop my hand for him.

He sniffs my knuckles, takes my wrist
between his teeth, bites down slow and hard,

starts a sound in his throat like a hundred pigeons
in a small dark space. I do not ask him to let go,

but call him everything I know to call him
over and over again. He does not answer

to his old name. He will not answer to his new one.

Automatic Transmission

Purpose used to get me uphill, sheer will
holding my tires against the gravel half-roads
to her house. I'd go faster than what felt right,
swerve around corners cut into the mountains
she said she never wanted to live without
or anywhere without something much larger than her,
even looking out the big window by the bed
while I grabbed at her like a teenage boy,
frantic, apologetic. She'd jerk her hips
then shudder, stop, pull my arm across her chest
like I was a strong man and not a strong, clumsy woman
with my breasts against her back.

In this new car, I feel like I do nothing. My right hand
still hovers by my side at each red light, waiting.

Daibutsu

The largest wooden building in the world
swells up before us. You've been here three times
and keep saying you've got to go back.
You won't say why. It seems like a matter of scale—
the deer so small and insistent, mouths just reaching
to tug the hem of my shirt, demanding food.
Inside the temple Buddha's unfolded hand is huge,
bigger than any bed we've ever had.

Two Japanese boys run up to us. *Do you like to basketball*
The shorter one asks you, twisting a yellow folder
in his hands. His friend shoves him. *He wants sex.*
The shorter one shoves back. *Fuck you!*
And they both disappear, laughing. You tuck
your blonde hair underneath your hat, tilt down
the brim to shadow as much of your face as you can.

Egrets

Who watches you now, stabbing at the ground
then throwing your white heads back, necks unbent,
beaks jawing the air like you are going to swallow everything
and this is how you start. When I got up early you'd be there
snatching insects from fresh-cut fields, stalking ditches
for fish. I got landlocked, but you stuck near rivers,
or any running water where you can't see the beginning or the end,
just the currents. Where else is there to go when the food runs out
and the weather gets this way: nothing, then rain that buckets
back and back into the ground, then nothing again,
and a thousand robins waiting, hungry, listening.
Come back. Scare them for me. And eat, and eat, and eat.

Watching a Horror Movie at Home

Is he a zombie?

This is a zombie movie. Almost everyone's
a zombie.

What's happening?

Those people are trying to not
get eaten.

Where are they?

Some suburb.

It looks like

that house the illegals burned down.

They were living there.

They shouldn't be here.

It was an accident.

It was a fire.

What's happening to him?

He's tied to a chair.

Is he okay?

Something ate his left ear, but otherwise he's good.

Don't

be smart.

You asked.

Is he going to shoot himself?

If he can get

to the gun.

I'd shoot myself.

His arms are loose, he's getting

closer—

I'd shoot myself right away.

Botulism

My dog stumbled in once like a drunk,
eyes and legs unsteady, a smell half-skunk
and half worse coating her body. She'd eaten
something too dead for her to handle and yes,
there was something rotted outside still rotting,
gristle and fur so jumbled it was a different
kind of animal than any one I might have known.

I took a shovel, threw the thing as far as I could
back towards the river, into the thick weeds
and young trees that hadn't choked each other out.
But a week later she staggered in again, bits of black
and green on her muzzle, the carcass in my yard.

So I locked her in the house, scattered brown grass
and gasoline on the body and burned it.
The fire picked up slowly, nearly smothered
by the wetness of the maggots, the drench of saliva.

Old Sparky

Sunflower County doesn't want to be the death county.
A prison, that's one thing, you need a place to put
those people. But rounding up murderers
and having them wait here? That's a bad business.
We don't want a part in that. Here's a right idea: let's
keep doing like we've been doing, but do it better—
no more gallows hidden in the weeds or taking all day
just to watch a man choke to death—Let's get an electric chair
like they got in Tennessee, but we'll put it on the back of a truck,
make it mobile so instead of sending anyone here
we can have her go take care of things out there
where they happened. Justice can't be put in one room.
And what is Progress but making a machine
anyone can use, anytime, anyplace, anywhere.

Yellow Mama

When you want a woman like that
you need to use some sense. Don't
bring in some yankee who can't tell shit
from shinola; get a man who knows
what day he's gonna die and ask him
who he's waiting for. He's heard about
electric chairs, dreamed the shape, the feel,
her name long before the boys brought over
these cans of paint from the highway project.
Singing *Mama, Yellow Mama* while he
finishes her up, slapping on a second coat
while the first one's still wet. He knows
what he wants, and she ain't no chicken.

The End of False Religion

False religion is a costumed woman.
She clutches a gaudy cup above
the Beast's seven horn-riddled heads.

Of course she'll get thrown. She'll fall
to the ground face up, arms spread, eyes shut,
mouth a line, an unfinished drawing.

The Beast will put a heavy paw, claws out,
on her stomach. It will snarl three heads
toward the sky and keep three heads quiet.

Her devastation will be a science.
Before burning and eating her breasts, before
making her naked, before anything, it must hate her.

That is for the last head to consider.
What's best: tearing the red skirt from her body
all at once, or shredding it slowly.
Should she be awake for this.

Horseheads, NY

I drove through snow with someone else
like me – we'd never seen it fall and the first time
we felt the tires slide I slammed my arms
against the dash and she squeezed the wheel.

But you drive through this weather easily,
your windshield choked with white.
I ask if the snow shoved up in mounds
taller than people ever causes problems
and you laugh. *It isn't what's falling*

you should worry about, or what's already frozen.
You point to something that looks like salt
to me, spilled and swirling across the blacktop.
There's the snow that'll kill you.

Flakes fall thicker now.
You lean forward, speed up.

The World's Tallest Man at 12

His life a little more than half over
but there's still a few years until
he'll need the cane to keep his balance.
He hasn't driven across the county yet
with his father, shaking hands, starring
in newsreels – Gentle Giant Comes to Kansas,
A Real Life Tall-Tale in Texas.

The bank has just failed. What he earned
selling magazines door to door
has vanished. He must know
this is the first of a thousand pictures
that will litter countless homes.
Arms straight out at his sides
like a scarecrow, his elbows
almost hover over two grown men.
Their heads are smaller than his hands.
He is the only one who smiles.

The Caption

Three pages are Charles doing handstands.
His pose looks natural, like all he had to do
in 1936 was smile and hold his body straight
over the sand, on the arms of deckchairs,
on another man's flat back.

His new wife stands upright in the context
of larger things. *Marie and the Ocean*, or
Marie Feeds the Seagulls. For a moment
her whole body goes dark, caught in a rollercoaster's
shadow. But I still see her. The caption sees her:
Marie (Not a Nigger).

That is where my brother shuts the cover,
calls the old commentary off-color,
and leaves the living room. His face twists
into my father's mouth stuttering
through the story of his father as a boy
finding a brand new Klan robe folded
at the bottom of his father's closet.

He took the hood and ran, thinking himself a ghost
or some other terror tearing through his tiny Indiana town.

After the honeymoon my uncle appears, as an infant.
While crawling in the front yard a cloud passes over him.
He goes dark. *Our Nigger Baby*.

Ukai

The boat rows out, a fire swinging off its prow.
Cormorants dive and resurface beneath the ashes,
flapping and gagging while the fisherman jerks them in.

He takes them by the neck the way I'd take your hands.
Strangling them quickly, gently, he forces the sweetfish
they've half-swallowed into a tall wicker basket.
I stand like you are leaning in, saying *I can't see, I can't see.*
What's happening? The fisherman turns away,

not looking for the white flash of throat when he throws
each bird back to the river, just checking the tension
on each line. You push to the front of the crowd, not
waiting for an answer. The boat goes further into the city.

Apparition

The white dog was on your roof
last night. I whistled.
He would not turn around.

He circled your bedroom window,
nosing at the brittle panes.
The white dog was on your roof.

You must have heard him,
or me calling, loudly.
He would not turn around

to stare, yellow-eyed, before jumping
off and vanishing like I've seen him do.
The white dog was on your roof –

he's still there, laying low.
I threw rocks at him all night.
He would not turn around.

He had no reason to. Your house
is falling down. I cannot hurt him.
The white dog is on your roof.
He will not turn around.

Poem Celebrating the Human Spirit

Only buy the fireworks a general
must have named: Phantom Assault, Flaming Heart,
Unyielding Justice. Throw firecrackers
in a stranger's yard. Fire bottle rockets
at an outdoor dinner party. Set off
smokebombs in every street. Let dogs
chase down the parachute men. Light
the fuses on ten paper tanks in a parking lot.
Watch them spark and sputter in circles
and gut themselves from the inside,
cardboard barrels exploding, plastic wheels
melting, wire skeletons exposed.
Throw the last match in the grass.
Swear you'll clean this up tomorrow.

Womanlike

Something resembling a woman, or something befitting one.

A wide river, or changing weather, or a pelican
ripping feathers and flesh from her breast to feed
her children blood because there is no other food.

(Vulning, that is called, though you will know it better
as vulnerable or endangered or another word with a feminine root.)

Antonyms from *vir*, - best imagined

as a triumph in proper order: Senators, trumpeters,
wagons of meat and cloth, two white bulls,
flags of enemies, prisoners, lictors. The red-stained
imperator. Sons, officers, and the army, armorless
and weaponless. They all march through Rome,
but the imperator ascends the Capitoline Hill alone,
leading the bulls to the temple. To say *Do not be afraid,*
I am only a man he will stun each animal and slit its throat.
He will take his laurel and burn it.

Triptych of Joan

1.

Her history is inconsistent.
We know a few things: she was a fraud,
of course, changed her name from Joan
to John (Both meaning God is gracious)
lied her way into the papacy, got pregnant,
had the child in public. And she died,
though it's unclear what killed her. Blood loss
from the baby? The people who saw her writhe
during the delivery might have stoned her.
They might have tied her ankles to a horse's tail
and watched him drag her through the streets.
Maybe she didn't exist.

2.

How strange she isn't the saint of mistakes –
Pardoned 20 years after the trial, sainthood
centuries after they burned her,
called Virgin of Orleans after the rape.
The jar is still inscribed as her remains,
though none of it – the charred wood,
the scrap of linen, the blackened rib,
the cat's femur – is hers, or anyone
she knew. They were pieces of a mummy,
a Victorian pharmacy's garbage
until someone squinted at them
and thought *Ah! Here she is!*

3.

Sometimes she lets things slip—
I am the daughter who looks most like her
maybe a little smarter than she was at my age.
Don't let them trick you like they tricked me.
When her father's organs were failing
she took me to a cemetery forty minutes

out of town. We lit candles at a stranger's grave
and she prayed in a language I didn't know.
I repeated, mumbling, but not moving
my fingers down the rosary, until—
her hand tight on my wrist—she begged.