2001

Three measures of nothing

Erika Stephanie Hall

Iowa State University

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Three measures of nothing

by

Erika Stephanie Hall

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Major: English (Creative Writing)
Major Professor: Debra Marquart

Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa
2001

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This is to certify that the Master’s thesis of

Erika Stephanie Hall

has met the thesis requirements of Iowa State University

Signatures have been redacted for privacy
This work dedicated to:

*Stephanie and Emily—*
  *first always*

*Donna, Jim, Richard, Deb*
  *teachers and more*

*Dan, my ocean,*
  *just because*

*Andrew, my best*
  *unbeaten brother*
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The brittle unbearable rests in your palm.
Will you close your fist or won’t you, and why?

Joel Brouwer
Star Story

I’ve played the starring role
in at least seventy-two dramas—
tragedies, comedies, masques—dramas
without names, I’ve laughed and cried.
I’ve been famous for twenty-nine
years and hold my head high because I’ve
survived and survived and survived.
Yes, my reward is I’m still here,
spinning back the reels,
for me and me and me,
the envy of no one, famous in my head.
Dream of Dorothy

After twenty years I dream of my grandmother still, not my first death but the crushingest; I was ten and they didn’t tell me until afternoon, but on that morning I could smell her dying from 300 miles. It smelled like split-pea soup and terrified my wide-eyed soul. I’d go to her house after, and sit in the death-empty chair, finger her tattered sewing box, long for Tang and the feel of her big body, like a cloud and smelling of Avon perfume—it was called Little Girl Blue. I knew she died because I’d said everything she crocheted was ugly. Now I’d wear any ugly hat, to lie, little again, against her billowy breasts and big belly mountains. She’d make everything alright.
Other Men

I won’t tell you what they did to me, 
but they weren’t some other kind of men. 
They had pictures in their 
genuine leather wallets that 
I sometimes fingered in the smoky light: 
wives, daughters, sisters, mothers and 
boys they were bringing up 
to be like them.

I won’t tell you what they wanted me to do to them, 
or say what it cost us all.

I’ll just round out this revelation 
with something about pot roast— 
how it sometimes still rumbled in 
their bellies 
there in the dark or, 
as they most often wanted, the light.
Transfusion

There’s no explaining to you
the magnitude
of that drip drip
  drip
  drip
  drip
not that fear
  drip
dripping
that unbearable
soul drip seeping
into my bones
not the blood of seven others
waltzing me wildly
into life
First Letter To My Dead Son

You, my tight-bound tragedy, I cradle and carry, 
wear you like an old dress, soft

or feel you crisp like
      an old letter lost among

my ordinary echoes, my empty
      heirlooms

You come    go

ramble  rove  unfold me

      in     delicate
      arcs and waves and

      futile mourning

in the night

      in my secret eye where
      all your soft bloody flailing

bends away
      to that old death still when

even God cried
      the day you were laid
beneath that stark stone    knowing

He had
      He had finally pushed    too far
Caution, or
Please don't run away but

Be careful, love.
My boxes are opened.
The doors are swung wide.
I have unwittingly taken
more than one man
down.
On a little mountain

In Alabama, sixteen,
we slept, shivering,
sliding perpetually down,
me crawling back to you or
you to me, my big belly
aching up toward God:
please keep this little fish warm.
Finally we built a nest of leaves and
locked legs, so at least we’d slide
down together.

When dawn came we hobbled
on numb feet
to the George Webb
drank ice water and got warm
A black man in a beret,
a hooker with a black eye, smiling;
a fat man wheezing about pigs.
I brushed my teeth with t.p. in the john.

Overcome by the smell of
the bacon, potatoes, coffee,
danish and O fantastic longing!
their cruel fucking merciless glee,
we got up and ran while we still could.
Begging is forbidden.
I was so cold I cried.
The Things An Unknown
Nobody In Adams, Wisconsin
Would Really, Really Like

My mother to never, ever die.
My children to never, ever cry.

My husband in love with me
at sixty at least.

To find myself and
then find myself
beautiful.

A good little garden with corn.
Healthy cigarettes.
Untitled

Candlelight flicks shadows
on the ceiling while Glenn Gould
hums behind the Bach. He couldn’t
stop himself, or simply refused
to quiet his moaning, or perhaps he
didn’t even hear his own sounds
like we don’t, can’t, here humming
softly too, to the rhythm of your body
playing in the bottom of mine,
lovingly relentless, until we become
our own Goldberg Variation, until
you make me boil and overflow.
I’ve Been Home

This is the only place I go
now in this town, my parents
house, come into town in the dark
and leave that way, ignore
all but this small plain pocket
on the corner on a street in the middle
of this town, a cruel bleak bubble
refusing to break.

Outside the white paint is peeling,
ugly, and I hate the junky yard,
but I can hide inside among
the clutter of my mother’s
instant gratifications:
chocolate, Avon, bingo, a
good score on internet games.

My daughters know this is their home, too.
They put saddles on the big dogs,
raiding the fridge and threaten
to go live with grandma
when they get mad.

There is only one bedroom now
so we sleep on the living room floor
where the cold town air
drafts in like fat snakes
smoothing in, silent, to caress us.
If you were to look in the window
you would see us:
we are all snoring lightly;
we are burning up in the love.
She is almost a ghost

My father’s mother has sky eyes
that are wispy and shed light.
She is almost a ghost and I am
the daughter of her dark sheep.
She is the owner of my smile
and likes to sit and talk while I
worry about what I should say.
She tries to hide blue-drop
tears for this, our first meeting
in twenty-five years. But I’ve been
a charm on her bracelet.
Maybe now I should say that
was enough. Or maybe it would have
been better if she had not come.
Simple Needs

She comes into our bedroom, little feet padding on the carpet in the quiet dark, blanket from her room dragging toys behind it, believes we are sleeping.

She breathes heavy with the chore and whispers to herself about bears, makes a bed nestled right up next to my side. Soon all her little snore sounds float the night.

She told me yesterday she wanted a different mom, who never yells. She lied.
Nobody Touches You With
My Hand Anymore

Reaching out into this longness
of air, of time and air, vast
as some desert and as dry,
I find your hard man-belly
where it has always waited
for me.

Your huge hand falls
along mine and we speak
only in secret squeeze:
three *I love you* and four
*I love you too*,
fall asleep believing
in tomorrow.
They Won't Wait For Me

No. They won’t save their wails for just a moment, just one moment while I think quietly. Not even one moment so I can find out where I am, who I am, why. So I can take one sip of water in peace. No. So I don’t ask them. I try really hard not to ask them—pleading or mean—please leave me the fuck alone because they won’t anyway. It would just hurt their feelings, you see.
Offering

I would give up my beloved cloth clown or my guitar or all my Elton John tapes and at least three dreams or my pinky fingers or if necessary a foot or everything but my daughters or poems or if it's a night like a thousand other nights with you I might get close might trade tomorrow like a worthless boot if only I could have a mountain spring and you back yesterday back home in the dandelions laughing like you'd never leave me, never die
What Tide

I want to paint my world in words
like velvet, angry, green...or
something like
cacophonous;
the lines, the tides,

the waxing moon,
my mother’s ripped vinyl chair;

your hair, your eyes, your quiet times,
and my old blackened bones;
the color of my lover’s skin and other
soul-bought memories, like brilliant fish.
But I never did say it was love –

not swimming this river of words,
my blood.
II

I long for the mantle
of the great wanderers, who lighted
their steps by the lamp
of pure hunger and pure thirst,

and whichever way they lurched was the way.

Galway Kinnell
I am thinking about

killing myself or becoming a nun
but I’m too afraid to tell anyone
they’ll know I’m crazy and do
something I’m just pretending to
be me I’m not really me I am lost
been looking for ten years or
more but I am gone and dead
bone tired deep black dead bone
tired sound the alarms
The Tenth Year

In the tenth year
little dark trolls with
rotten teeth sing in a happy
ring-around-and-around-the-rosy
on a playground
after dark

you-whooo
you-whooo
there won't be any simple deaths
for you-whooo
you-whooo
for you there won't be one
dead baby, but two-whoooo
just for you

you-whooo
you-whooo
there won't be any simple deaths
for you-whooo

for you there won't be one
dead baby, but two-whoooo
just for you.

the sky will
cry and
cry and
swollen,
aching,
hard,
there will be two
perfect cantaloupes crying
double-time,
sopping the front of
your black funeral dress
in milk, milk for no one
but you,

the girl who gets not one
dead baby, but two.
Calamity

The story wasn’t supposed to end.
“” this way.
“” equaling
Regret.

Shit Damn.
Close the Book.

Tell it to the
DemonMonkeySpitefulBone
on my shoulder

whispering

You shouldn’t ask yourself so many questions;
You wouldn’t tell yourself so many lies.
The Way You Cried the First Time

That night you took me hard and deep and slow, me on my knees and listening close to each silent sob saying don't do this to me now not when I've loved you woman don't make me hate you for dying or leaving or going crazy don't...

After, still naked and tangled, that fire waned to a smolder, you were just a boy again in my arms; meek, spent, hurt that you might have hurt me. I couldn’t say anything. All I knew is that sometimes love, sometimes love does hurt.
The White Room
   for Teri

And now you give me this white room,
where grandmothers linger
and angels watch.
Rest, here's a cloud,
beds of feathers
I've never known.
But please!
I won't want go--
crying like the baby
I hide
because I have never
been safe
but here.
Dear don't you know

for this how
I have loved you so.
Solving For Us

Try to be math-minded
Identify all elements
of the equation
Place them in the proper
order that we don’t know
Assign traditional values
Don’t you even think about love
You know that won’t compute
Dummy
O.K.

So you wanted me to give you my poem and I couldn’t.
So you wanted me to be not me and I wasn’t. O.k.

My friend Kim tells me I only need the bathtub and beer;
I would laugh at how fluffy my breasts look floating,
if I weren’t so busy crying.

Two cheap, sweet bottles of Boonesfarm later
I think I am merely looking for Spring; I would
like to see her one more time
come laughing over the hill spilling flowers.

Now I am on the rose, the bitter, half-empty
bottle I pour for my grandmother.
I fear I will need still another, I fear I will
even take down my
wedding champagne
and send the cork flying
into the million disintegrations
love always is
All The Day’s Dying

these are the days we know
and unknow in all

their unholy multifold blazing;
the slick origami trick of some God
conjured—just so much smoke...

We sit in our suffering:
heroic, but that’s no consolation.
Staring like stones into the
rambling illusion
we want and wanted
and hate and love.

The sterile stink of death finally blossoms
blowsy and thick and roving.

All the days dying done,
we wait for laughing.

It comes.
Boiling Down

At the party, mother teases that I am the only one who could burn water. She says it lovingly, of course, so I won’t say well at least I did not forget my eggs boiling until they flew popping out of the pan, bursting angry little egg-bombs, like she did. No. Who anyway would understand my penchant for over-boiling, see the rolling water turned to its own truth, share such generous affliction, know metaphor, know everything always boils down.
Divorce

It's the crease of dark and light
at dawn that cuts the deepest:
that sharp hour of memory and need,
of desire.

There was a day you waited
down the aisle (that longest day)
and we lit a candle then, said
it would always burn...a slow
flame rising through all nights.
In your eyes I could see your
whole life trembling, bathed
in the odd, golden light

Now, here,
it's the other side of forever
and the light only comes like a blade
and my wrists get cut
and our children
scream from your wounds
The things we beg not to remember

come unbidden, like ghosts in dreams
that scared us as children, late night
voo-doo cannibals from the movies we
weren’t supposed to watch, visions
we tried to forget but kept seeing

On Red-Eye Theatre Johnny Nash
sang I can see clearly now,
clearly—he said the rain was gone
as if that were a good thing

but aren’t we often begging for
the blur, dark glasses blotting out
the blistering light of memory, thick
spring showers to ease the pain
Edge

I am hovering, poised
for a fall I see like a
slow-motion motion
picture dropping
porcelain that splatters
up down tinkle
tinkle slow then silence,
quiet waited for so long
My Father’s Pills

have arrived
a month before I am
to commit suicide.
How convenient.
My Lover’s Wife

I didn’t feel a thing
for my lover’s wife
until he told me

about her idiot passion
for old things, for old dressers,
tables, shelves, for loving
them back into beauty

about her taking back her skillsaw
for a refund, for the family, for priorities

about him being clever enough
when she found an antique dresser
for $15 to say
he noticed roaches in it
to repeat how they’d invade the house
to tell how he’d have to move out
to get their sons to agree and chant along
until

she finally cried
and said stop the truck
where they threw the dresser out
into a field, and went home.

It was when he relished
his power to break
her tiny, invisible bones,
that I felt some thing and I did,
I punished him for her.
**Yellow Fish**

The yellow fish
in my shrink’s fish tank
makes me mad
with desire
She is like a crayola sun, swimming
back and forth
and *back and forth*
She knows she is beautiful

I wish I could be like her
I wish I knew
that I was beautiful, too
The Complexity of Afternoons

The rain comes calm and steady like a good mother.
My fingers are playing and playing
piano in the dark.
When God forgets them,
the nuns go apple picking.

The complexity of afternoons:
terrifying.
September 6, 1997

"Tropical storm Erika becomes hurricane"

-CNN Weather Service

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Bang.

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Bang.
This drunkenness began in some other tavern.
When I get back to that place,
I'll be completely sober. Meanwhile,
I'm like a bird from another continent, sitting in this aviary.

I didn't come here of my own accord, and I can't leave that way.
Whoever brought me here will have to take me home.

*Jalal al-Din Rumi*
Thoughts Upon Waking

If I didn't have this plastic tube
down my throat breathing
for me,
I would laugh.
This is the funniest joke
God has played on me yet.
Answers

“...what did it feel like we all wonder at her
like all the corners of the world slammed
together?”

–Dan Johnson

It felt like
It felt like barbed wire squeezing everywhere, white hot
shock and God
saying no my eyes seeing, my
soul whole and not that I was dead
but that everything else was music
the universe refusing, my own blood gurgling,
my own better pain, the bullets
out the back and charred
fire rings black on
my breast the explosive burn
the everything I’d waited for moments,
no tears freedom shining shining
whole whole It was peace pain,
deathly calm, tropical
hurricane Erika curiosity
It was tired in my bones
and the EMT whisper:
what did you dooooooo sweeeetie?
It was I shot myself twice
and if I could’ve lifted my arm I’d have
shot again
Sixth Floor, 1997

I do not belong among these brave, sick souls
who come outside to smoke in wheelchairs
or dragging IVs, stories, psych ward passes

We compare time spent, explain
why we need to borrow cigarettes,
why the ones who love us haven’t come

I say I was shot but not by whom and no one
prys. Instead we talk about baseball and agree
that if we all had good livers we’d drink beer
University Hospital, Day 20

Mad Max the Goldfish Man has arrived
in his best polyester and
a yellow American Legion tie.
His suit is as blue as his bloodstained eyes
and his best tennis shoes,
white.

He comes bearing gifts:
a bottle of perfume
(he lost the top)
all the magazines with Dianna on the cover
(stolen from VA waiting rooms)
and a pair of white socks
(too small for him).

He is a gentleman.

After a while we go outside, smoke in the sun,
talk about philosophy, art,
the morning bus ride to Cleveland that he can’t
escape.
We talk about everything but why.
Not why I’m here.
Not how I got here.
Not about, in fact, that I am even here at all.

Before heading for the elevator,
he who gave me
these hands, this wild mind,
this soul on fire...
Before heading for the elevator he says:
*Thank you mostly for being my friend.*
And I am left wondering, wondering,
at how little I have known him—
this man, my father—
First Snow

New York, 1997

All the people are in their houses and the moon is full.
The night is brighter when the world’s so white.
I am 26 and still sneaking cigarettes
so my grandma won’t find out, my
hand out the window in the middle of winter.

She made a gift today of my father’s pictures—
my father in his bassinet,
my father catching fish,
my father with a big pot-belly as a boy
and those same wise eyes full of somewhere
other than New York at
first snow, last snow, snow.
Where? We might know next year
if we’re lucky.

Off in the distance church bells ring at 1:00 a.m.
Someone has died died died
Someone in New York has died...
under the full moon
and the world innocent white
with first snow.
By 9:00 am

I’ve written a note, dropped off my oldest daughter at school, apologized we slept late taken my younger daughter to day care, apologized

Mommy is sick
apologized
come home
put my nightgown back on
apologized
apologized
gone back to bed just to rest quietly, listen to the furnace running, apologize

most of all for the fact that the ticket I bought last year was not round-trip.

I’ve come home and put my nightgown on and returned to bed but this is about as close to home as I’ll ever get again.
Neighbor Children When Mine Are Gone

In Nigerian-tinted English
John and Paul are playing in their bedroom
on the other side of my bedroom wall:
*John is dying, aahhh! Save him, save him!*
until Paul let’s out his normal
deep-gut-baby-squeal-laugh
and they change to being cowboys, inside
today, because of the rain.
I can even hear the water swooshing
in the bathtub when they bathe.

Their mother is tall and black and proud and
dresses impeccably, their father too.
On the other side of my children’s
bedroom wall, where there’s a bed, but no children, is where the parents sleep and
sometimes when I hear Paul whimper in the night from a dream,
if she comes
to sooth him I think of
going to sleep in the empty room, of
trying the sounds on the other side of that wall,
but I don’t—
I listen for Paul—because John sleeps quiet,
and when I hear him I put my hand on the wall
and whisper
*shhhhhhhhhhhhh, little one,*
*shhhhhhhhhhhhh*

Tomorrow when the sun comes
they will go to the sandbox again,
the strong young black boys,
worlds in their palms.
Defenseless

Our father is reduced now:
wired, monitored, beeping and still,
silent in the hospital bed, railed in,
harmless.

They've given us this chance to kill him,
his oldest daughters with dark sides,
not knowing how and not
why we are fleetingly dreaming
that when they do pull
that tube out from his brain-dead throat
he'll leave for his last journey
screaming in his mind

while we, looming large,
crawl into bed over him,
monster-voices shaking the walls,
booze-stained whispers banging
his ears, loud fists beating
his mother down and
down and down and finally
leaving us all finally
leaving him all alone
Turning

Where do we turn now, reconciled
as we are to
the truth of things,
having braved the dark and
stood the pain?
Is the earth concerned with turning?
Or with which way it is turning?
We have searched for guidance,
we have prayed,
we have recovered our selves....

we have even considered
not turning at all.

We have rested at the crossroads
and still cannot know.
Just put your hand in mine, love.
It is morning and we have
miles to go.
Suicide Friday

That old green recliner of my husband's
was a leftover from some old love and is,
therefore, not missed by me. But I dream of
it sometimes still—the chair—out there burning
on the farm, half floating into heaven and half
going back; the dead lead hidden in the ashes
returning to ashes. Only the bullets went out
thru my back; the chair did catch them;
the chair did burn and I am still alive.
Nothing is as dramatic as it seems.
Farm Dream  
September 1998, Oconto, WI

Praise God I found
(underneath a pretty
   blue scarf bobbing lightly)
along County A
(the only place I had to go)
a beautiful black-haired
lady milking
   cows, baking, loving the
bright clean children getting dirty,
the baby in a wagon eating apples.

Some nights she is missing her husband.
Her husband has to make hay.
She is always praying.

(Can't I stay here forever....)

.....no,
not even these
hungry, fragrant fields will
bury all my burned
bones.

I wish it weren't
   only
in the dream that
I can fall
   down into
her brown eyes....
be that pure.
Early Portrait, 1999, Red

a bloody mary with five olives
the too-red nails black and vast

here it comes out quiet, fast, slow
“I told them not to go” I told them not to go
everybody wants to know what’s

behind sleek black breast
her little tight face main gear bare
one nation stopped up duende
one people GOD BLESS YOU Federico!
one creed sunken shot tender crystals
all humankind moving machines
violence
hunger beware
strife beware
loamy red beware
fine slick straight red beware
Treasure Trail

It's the scar that starts
between my breasts,
a straight trail
down my belly,
thrumybellybutton,
down,
almost-all-the-way between
my legs,
a bright red blazing
trail, a feminine
fillet.

That's what he called it.
You take the trail down
to the treasure...

Then he kissed his way.
Three Measures of Nothing

I
Her six-year-old face
whimpers when I tell her
she can’t live with me;
someday means nothing to a child, nothing.
And reasons even less, now, when
she moves still only to the measure
of her tiny, savage heart.

II
I cut and cut and cut
at myself to bleed out
the striving for good
which is the measure
of all our disappointments.
But that endless stream washes nothing away.

III
I wait until she sleeps to grieve,
holding her small body in my arms.
Nothing in this world
can equal
the measure of my desolation.
Message to Self

Feb 27, 2001

Get up on out of this pit girl.
All those fat dark devil birds
flapping and cawing—
let them fly and
then point your gun at the right thing woman:
shoot them, butcher them, tear them down
with your teeth
1 feather by long black
feather just
do what you have to fucking do so
that when you go you will
leave all those ugly bodies behind,
beaten down, dead finally,
bloody on this Iowa snow.