

6 Poems by Jennifer Lagier

Accepting the Habit

Penguins
we called those
Brides of Christ
who knelt
to escape burning dreams
in their celibate beds.

After Catechism
we practiced mortal sin
with boys tutored by dirty magazines,
pretended the hands
inside our bras
belonged to grown men.

One by one
we tired of dreams
that refused to breathe,
took the easy out
and succumbed
to our grandmothers' myths.

After white weddings blessed
by priests, familiarity exorcised
the devil we originally craved,
left us in sexual poverty,
cloistered and chaste.

Now we confess to therapists,
perform treadmill penance,
and Zoloft has become
our sacred communion of choice.

Where We Grew Up

The walls had hooks,
wire barbs reaching from the stucco
to rip a child's skin.
From time to time,
fireballs would spin
around the asphalt kitchen floor
and drain pipes gave off an odd glow
beneath the yellow tiled sink.

I remember the hot breath
of some invisible presence
standing between my sister and me
alone and afraid
in our maple twin beds.
Dad whimpered in his sleep;
mother turned and turned,
grinding her teeth in frustrated anger.

Sometimes on especially hot summer evenings
we could hear the distant cries
of injured late shift cannery workers
as they tried pulling their crushed limbs
from relentless moving cogs
or assembly line belts.

The rising delta wind brought
their moaning pleas into stifling rooms
where we wept our way through bad dreams,
windows open as wide as they would go.
Every sound carried.

Coffee Klatch

Something compels me
to visit the donut & coffee shop
where my dead father
and his cronies
used to hang out.
Farmers, ag supply salesmen
occupy every table, drink in
right-wing political commentary,
local gossip, sexist remarks,
not another woman in sight.
Evening the odds,
I invite a female cousin
to join my sister and myself
for a cup of terrible brew.
We commandeer our own space,
force men to move from chairs
they've called theirs over 35 years.
We shriek, compare men's laughter
to the sound of untuned Harleys,
share priceless phrases
we've just overheard.
Unable to adjust
to women with opinions,
geezers grumble;
we've invaded,
good old boy territory.
Twenty minutes later,
we've run off the last of them,
declare the place ours,
a testosterone-free zone,
plan our next offensive,
tip the counter girl well.

Lunar Eclipse

It's midnight and I'm high on
chardonnay and adrenaline.
We watch night's crawling shadow
above Half Moon Bay,
any sense of responsibility
quickly erased.

You steer one-armed,
tires clunking against highway reflectors,
fingers inside each other's clothes,
both of us igniting at sixty miles an hour
like teenage lunatics.

Tonight I want nothing more
than to slide beneath your hands
in this clockless universe,
smell your love upon my skin
while the ghostly hills pass.

Midlife Crisis

Its arrival coincides
with your hunger for taut boys
possessing empty heads and endurance,
chronic muteness,
and a nine p.m. curfew.

Computer screens and old photos
make you cry.
So does the sight
of unopened mail,
on the tile kitchen counter.

It paints your face over
so you look like your mother,
implants amnesia
in the last of your brain cells.

Suddenly
you are ready to run away
to Soquel or Costa Rica
with a tattooed lesbian activist
or your boss's conservative partner.

Instead,
you cut your hair,
enroll in tai chi,
boost your dosage of hormones.

Eating It: The Compulsory Feast

He wasn't the spouse you'd have chosen,
but when your father, the padrone, insisted,
you swallowed her words.

An Italian child-bride, you performed as expected:
cleaned his house, cooked his food,
massaged his ego, growing big in the belly.

Even in pain, complaint was a language
not allowed from your mouth.

Laboring beneath a sheet on the bright silver gurney,
you held in screams, resisted the urge to bear down
and deliver until the tardy doctor
could be called to attend.

A terrified nurse kept shoving the infant
back into your womb,
talked of god's mysterious ways,
tried to starve the mistake.

At night, you crept from your hospital bed.
Secretly dripped milk from frustrated fingers
to the lips of your brain-damaged firstborn.
For fourteen years, you protected and tended
this vegetable daughter, until puberty pushed her
from maturity to death in one violent seizure.
Within a year, your aging husband had joined her.

Unhitched from a rack of compulsory muteness,
you unclenched your jaws, vomited madness.