

*KARAOKE HYMNAL*

Grandma gave us flimsy hymnals  
every year at Christmas. Rather than  
ask the priest at seasons' change,

she dumpster dove all fourteen,  
misted their covers and dried them flat  
in the thick warmth of her tiny kitchen.

When scrubbed of all iniquity,  
singing seemed a stoic rite,  
crammed with broken spirit, loss,

and hours of red-kneed romance.  
The girl who tied her shoes too tight,  
the one who wrecked her socks with jacks,

learned to sing when no one listened.  
Sight-read songs stay potent longer,  
stick like Morse code I learned at five.

Its dahs and dits are not so different  
from treble clefs and hooked-up notes—  
add the forte, subtract the piano,

do it all in four-four time. The bathroom  
acoustics favored my alto. Lavatory  
choir director, or outlaw priestess bent on shame.

Marble basin for my altar,  
beveled mirror, my sacristy.  
Porcelain congregation seated,

waiting for my solo, crescendo: garments  
are changed for ashes and sackcloth,  
mystery, doxology, the deer pants for water, repeat.

A hard-broken habit, God's dirty  
alchemy. All at this moment are dying.  
Here I am. You called. It is night.

*MATHEMATICS OF BACKSASS*

I'm answering back, backsassing, lip giving, sauce stirring,  
smart mouthing, not watching my tongue, not changing  
my tone, not wiping my smirk. Yes, I guess I do need  
my choke checked, want my attitude adjusted, I'm cruising  
for breaking, ordering a fist sandwich, begging for a bruising,  
'cause I'm running my mouth, dashing my trap, not shutting  
my yap, not playing Quaker, I'm not biting down, won't act white,  
whatever that is. I'm not getting a grip, not taking a square,  
not grabbing a corner, not breathing out blue, not timing my out,  
won't damper the flue, won't hold it all in. I'm throwing a fit,  
I'm crying out loud, I won't keep it buttoned, won't zip it,  
won't cheese it, I'm not keeping clam, I'm not staying mum.  
I won't lock it, won't pocket, won't throw away the key—  
the numbers are up and this is the way the new math will read.