

Advance Praise

“Bryanna Licciardi’s *Fish Love* is full of regret—in the best way possible. In these poems, regret becomes a passageway, opening door after door, leading to both knowledge and acceptance of the self, a self that is creative and cruel in turns. These poems explore identity as constructed by geography, genes, and gender: ‘I’m still unraveling,’ the speaker notes, ‘the truth that *belonging* means offering up / pieces of yourself like sacrifice.’ It’s a strategically unsettling book as it juxtaposes narratives of serial killers alongside memories of difficult grandmothers, of problematic parents, of the ongoing frustration with ‘the realization / that my dissatisfaction was not / with people, but with / their predictability.’ *Fish Love* is anything but predictable. It evades the hook as it limns the space between desire and destruction, between loving and changing the self, between regret and slippery, fishy relief.”
—Amie Whitemore, author of *Glass Harvest*

“Ah, love! In Bryanna Licciardi’s hands, the slippery fish makes virgins into sex addicts and women into desserts because they, too, are ‘served last.’ To swim in this school is to reason with babies one never plans to have and learn that ‘freedom is a sword / with too many edges.’ *Fish Love* finds us all out-matched by the depths, unless we let love off the hook for its fishiness and let it lure us beyond ourselves.”
—Amy Wright, author of *Paper Concert*

“In Bryanna Licciardi’s piercingly observant collection, profound longing and nostalgia introduce us to a speaker aware and prescient of the body, political and sensual, in all its complexities. The body is one, the body is multiple, Licciardi reminds us, as she writes simultaneously toward and away from childhood memory. She also reminds us that originality

has to do with what is timeless turned sideways: 'After months of thinking otherwise, / I am concluding less and less.' Formally inventive, syntactically animate, *Fish Love* is sinister and funny, egoless and immaculate, and convinces us how 'belonging means offering up / pieces of yourself like sacrifice.'"
—Gary McDowell, author of *Aflame*

FISH LOVE

poems

BRYANNA LICCIARDI



Alternating Current Press
Boulder, Colorado

Copyright © 2024 Bryanna Licciardi
All rights reserved

Published by Alternating Current Press
Boulder, Colorado 80302
altcurrentpress.com
All rights reserved

Library of Congress Control Number: 2024933406
ISBN-13 (paperback): 978-1-946580-50-4
ISBN-10 (paperback): 1-946580-50-3
ISBN-13 (hardcover): 978-1-946580-51-1
ISBN-13 (ebook): 978-1-946580-52-8

Interior and cover design: Leah Angstman
Author photo: Kelly Chapman Photography © 2022, 2024

The following is a work of fiction created by the author. All names, individuals, places, items, brands, events, characters, &c., are the product of the author's imagination, are used fictitiously, or are entirely coincidental.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopied, recorded, or otherwise, without the prior permission of Alternating Current Press, except for the quotation of brief passages used inside of an article, criticism, or review.

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Table of Contents

i. don't tell me you love the fish

Double Dream	17
Assigned Buddies	18
They Called Him Bear	20
Someone Sets Me Up with Charles Manson	21
Hopalong Cassidy Was Grandmother's Hero	22
Catch	23

ii. you love yourself

Their Destroyed Mouths	27
Think about Jellybeans as You Die	28
Seasonal	29
Temple Building	31
I'm 13 & Mom Convinces Me Period Blood Is Sacred	32
Reimagining My Birth as Zeus & Athena	34
Dealing	35

iii. tastes good

Dear Stephen King	41
Lies I Told My Baby Brother	43
Eating Mercy	44
Interview with Mercy	46
Twenty-Seven-Year-Old Virgin Sex Addict	47
Tidal Waves	48

iv. out of water

Trying to Reason with the Baby I Never Plan to Have	53
Losing Weight	55
Thoughts I Don't Share While Out to Dinner with a New Guy	57
Fragments of a False Elegy	59
When the Bank Says My Account Was Drained	61
A Millennial's Unfinished Odes to Her Many Terrible Jobs	63
20th Anniversary	65

v. killed it, boiled it

H. H. Holmes Steals a Cadaver for Our Date	69
A Guilt Trap Has Many Teeth	70
Reconciling	72
Mantras of an Anxious Child	74
My Brother Tells Us about Catching Teenagers Stealing Shoes at the Department Store	75
Dream Where My Teeth Fall Out	76

vi. most of love, is fish love

Ax	81
Found on or Near Jack Parsons' Body, Post-Blast	82
Beasts	84
If I Moved to Truth or Consequences	85
What I Meant When I Said Love	87
Bless the Chocolate with Sprinkles	88
Body Worship Takes Work	90
Fish Love	92

He said, “Don’t tell me you love the fish. You love yourself. And because the fish tastes good to you, you took it out of the water and killed it and boiled it.” So much of what is love, is fish love.

—Rabbi Dr. Abraham Twerski



i.

don't tell me you love the fish

Double Dream

Now that you're gone
the night craves us.
I listen as it stirs and
settles, stirs and unsettles.
You might have told me
the house is shifting,
that my Stephen King
obsession has left me
too many monsters,
but now, with the lights off,
everything feels heavy—
my arms, our bed, sheets,
even an open window
starts to fall, as if the night
has kidnapped our days,
stuffed them into
a thousand dark suitcases,
and now regrets
all this weight.

Assigned Buddies

The teacher says these girls are good for me
because my twang is a target, and at first,
I agree. Even after they push lunch trays
at me to put away, tell me not to speak without
permission, call me redneck that time I say *y'all*.

It's too cold here to feel like myself.
My parents have bought us foreign clothes
—snow pants, thermal underwear.
Not until the sun comes do I realize how much
I've missed my own clothes. Like my overalls.
I love how they don't slip down my scrawny hips
the way jeans do. Today I'm strutting

the hallways, feeling freely myself.
Kids pass, pointing and belly laughs that
I don't understand. On the bus, my buddies say
only hicks wear overalls. I'm an embarrassment.
I'd like to tell you I made them lick dirt,

but it's third grade, and I'm still unraveling
the truth that *belonging* means offering up
pieces of yourself like sacrifice.
I'm the new girl who talks funny,
who doesn't know cursive or the times table,
who needs the teacher's help
to put on her snow pants.

At home, I rip off the overalls,
throw them in the trash bin outside, but
that's not enough distance between us,
so I grab a can of Pearly Pink paint
left over from my new room,
and pour it over the denim like frosting.
I wait then, for relief, or regret
—whichever comes first.

They Called Him Bear

Not because his arms looked like
two watermelons devoured by cobras,

or the mass of fur poking through his shirt.
Not because his laugh shook the car.

Not because his hands were clawing beneath my straps,
or because his smile was all sharp and predator.

Not because he parked us by the woods
after I'd fallen asleep.

Not because his car became a cave.
Not because his hunger.

They called him Bear because
he was their protector.

A loving father, husband,
and of all people there that night, at that party,

with him, they said,
I would be safe.

Someone Sets Me Up with Charles Manson

*Serial killer charged with inciting murder, though
never found guilty of committing a murder himself.*

But I get there to find Charles has sent two guys in his place. They eat like wolves and want me to pay because Charles told them I would, and I do. I ask if he'll show up later, and they tell me, *Maybe, but he's Manson, Son of Men—so it's hard to say.* The taller guy puts his hand on my knee and winks. The other one, gnashing meat through his teeth when he smiles, has a Southern accent and asks me to call him Cowboy. Eventually I make an excuse to leave, can't recall why I even showed, but they follow me into my car and fling off their shoes. I roll down the windows because it smells so bad. *Where can I drop you off?* I say. *What's the rush?* they want to know. Cowboy asks if I'd like to see their ranch, learn about the coming war, possibly bang The Man himself. I've finally discovered my sanity, so I tell them, *When pigs fly,* and the tall one says, *Oh, they may not fly, but boy, do we make them run.*

Hopalong Cassidy Was Grandmother's Hero

After each episode, I imagine young her
blazing a rusted bike through the streets,
desperately in search of that Wild West.

In dreams, I'm there, too,
watching her posed small against
a black-and-white screen.

I want to warn her, *Don't turn around!*
I want to promise that life's better
if you know to look this way.

But Hopalong always gets booted for Technicolor.
And my grandmother's back stays turned
to what's coming: the rapturing static.



About the Author

Bryanna Licciardi resists the question, “Where are you from?” She has lived all over the country—California, Texas, Michigan, Massachusetts, Louisiana—and currently resides in a small town near Nashville, Tennessee. She is a degree collector of sorts, with a BA from Austin Peay State University, an MFA from Emerson College, and a doctorate from Middle Tennessee State University. She works as an English lecturer and professional development coordinator, also at MTSU. Her spare time is spent taking care of four cats and one husband. Licciardi’s first book, *Skin Splitting*, is a poetry chapbook from Finishing Line Press (2017). Her literary works have also appeared in such publications as *Blaze-Vox*, *Cleaver Magazine*, *Poetry Quarterly*, *Red Flag Poetry*, and *The Adirondack Review*. For more about her work, go to bryannalicciardi.com.



altcurrentpress.com