“London in the Fall” – ©Valerie Triggs

This selection of work inquires into the human obsession with the ideal. When we focus completely on the ideal body, marriage, life-style, religion, we are unable to be true to ourselves. We become the secondary character in our own lives, and as a result we hate ourselves and torture ourselves in a variety of ways. In a world where we are inundated with powerful rhetorical devices that ask us to achieve the unattainable we must work very hard to bring attention to the signifying practices that chain us to an ideology prescribed by an unknown source (Maybe it is the government, maybe corporations, religious leaders,
maybe a coalition of forces bent on having power.). When we do not know who we are and are continually focusing on becoming someone else, we become occupied with a distraction that keeps us from ever saying or asking for what we truly need in society. And when we cannot ask for what we need, the people in power will never have to compromise their control or power and give it to us.

This body of work is designed to point out some of the rhetorical devices that we may not ever think of as tools to keep us distracted from our actual selves and the poem form asks us to seriously think of stopping these naturalized habits. For example, coupling “You look great” with “You have lost weight.” I am not saying that corporations or the government has trained people to say these two phrases together but that the images we are saturated with reify the skinny model as the ideal body and drive us to saying those two things together—all the time—and have created a rhetorical device that works to legitimize the ideological message. And if we do not explore the rhetorical practices that work to confine us to an ideological principle, whether we agree with it or not – we will only be a slave to it.

Poems Below: So Good Dead

What if Jesus Wore a V-Neck Sweater?

45

Tricksters

My Mother’s Dress

So Good Dead

The machines are in rows, facing the TV where we watch Oprah or Cooking shows and pretend that we eat.

“You look great,” one says to me.
“You have lost weight,” the other gushes examining my figure.

"gravesite for chimney sweeps and sex trade workers" – ©Valerie Triggs
Treadmill spins, maximum speed corresponds with an 8-minute mile

They run on either side.
I am the meat in a Dutch crunch sandwich.
My gluts romp to the rhythm of their compliments.

They mean ten pounds ago I looked like shit.
“What have you been doing?” they glean with wonderment.

Power Incline Max 5, minimum 3

“Well, today I ran seven miles,” damp heads nod approvingly, “drank five cups of black coffee, and every time I felt hungry I smoked a cigarette.”
Their faces fall, ashen –disgusted.
Speed minimum 6.5

They had wanted to hear: almonds, dried fruit, barley water, low-sodium turkey.
Everyone wants a spiritual leader, an ideal. They had wanted Gandhi.
They were given his emaciated twin, Mary Kate --fit enough for institutionalization.
But still I am winning.
Weight: 1-0-5

I am a narcissistic exerciser. I am a seasonal anorexic and it’s Christmas.
I look good in skin-tight bones, thank you.
Increase incline max 9, minimum 7

I can make myself light as a feather, as light as light.
I run fast because I am working for the day they say, “you would look really good dead.”

Modify Custom Profile: Maximum Calorie Burn

“Necrophilia is in. Could you roll your eyes into the back of your skull? Don’t move.
Let your tongue loll out the side of your mouth. YES. FUCK YES! Your husband is one lucky man.”
Ultimate Body Mass Index: 24 grams

I’m not working for diamonds here. I don’t care about Karats.
In the end you won’t find me on the hotel floor
engorged and stuffed into a size six.
I’m not a sweetheart, not a sex star --I don’t swallow.
I breathe. I inhale.
I smoke.

“Well whatever works,” one sighs, and their damp heads nod approvingly.
"London in the Fall" – ©Valerie Triggs

**What if Jesus wore a v-neck sweater**

What if Jesus wore a v-neck sweater
And horned rimmed glasses
And he was a babe, who admitted that he did not have all the answers.

What if Jesus told you it was okay to fuck,
To wear lipstick and dabble in S&M,
And all the gay men swooned on sight.

What if Jesus told you to follow your heart
Even if your heart wants you to sin really badly
Because being true to your-self is being close to God.

What if Jesus had a last name like Ramirez or Lebovitz
And his hair was curly like a lamb,
And he wore really good lip balm and drove a Prius.

What if Jesus was late getting here because he was stuck in traffic
On his way back from a rehab clinic
with Amy Winehouse and Lindsay Lohan

What if Jesus was addicted to hearing people say his name in vain
What if he loved it, and wanted us to say his name
All the time, in weird and perverse ways.

What if Jesus stood before us and said he was sorry
For all the trouble he had caused.
That he was sorry for making us so friggin’ paranoid

And that he was concerned about the fear we have about talking about him
Like expecting lightning to strike the keypad if we say anything bad.
What if he said we could say all the bad things about him that we want and that it’s okay

What if he said something like “sticks and stones may break my bones
But my name will never hurt you.”

"gravesite for chimney sweeps and sex trade workers" – ©Valerie Triggs

45

“Forty-five women were killed –most due to burns or asphyxiation– after a fire broke out in the female ward of a drug treatment hospital in Moscow. The mayor said it was ‘a very serious, and unpleasant incident.’” – Telegraph U.K. December 9, 2006
Pretty Russian Princesses shielded
from needles, spoons, and fermented sugars,
habilitate in a fortress on the fourth floor.

The thin ones get fur, the fat ones get wool.
But none of their warm muffs,
or tracked arms, can raise the downy white-

-alone.
Retrofit with iron limbs of restraint,
embraced against the feral fire
that seeps through the will and wall of women
over the parapet, slipping through the crenels
of a barren brick battlement.

Red fur flames lick away the will
that locked them in for the trip
as noxious fumes ascend the stair
two-
three-
four-
five,

how many more to twelve?

Metal grates
Can’t escape
Easy to asphyxiate

Noses and mouths press along the sill
Fight for cracks that leak the icy chill

Who will be first to extricate,
yielding to the listless white,
the warm cherry lip, teeth, tongue,
the soft under arm, breast and lung?

Tricksters

I
They stand, beautiful boxes lined with red velvet
Perfect cases—empty.
Waiting for filched treasures, blossoms, dreams.

II
Mother warned me, Girls are not afraid.
They want it to happen. They’ll trick you.
It’s better not to tempt yourself
Because before you know it—you’ll be a father,
And then what?

III
Alone in the bedroom, my first penthouse at the edge of the bed
where the red mouthed women, beg
with eyes deep as a sunken chest
And 1 million little soldiers
At the end of my hand, giving the tissue a golden hue.

IV
Her tarnished lips sigh for womankind
Long hair falling over her shoulders
I can feel her ovaries shaking, her clock ticking,
Her uterus a small fist, pounding.
She crushes her cigarette into a soiled ashtray.
She is ordering drinks and offering the ultimatum:
Why at the end, when the air is breaking
Does she come looking so seductive?
There’s no history here,
it’s an easy score.

V
The heady gametes race along the walls of pink and red,
Eating up the deceptive sugars. It’s a long road, not much food on the way
Eggs for dinner…eggs for lunch…gestation for breakfast.
"London in the Fall" – ©Valerie Triggs

My Mother’s Dress
--after Anne Sexton and William Carlos Williams

He doesn’t drink like my husband,
and enjoys seeing me barefoot in the yard.
Six years since I filled this dress with the matronly hips of my mother,
And I still can’t keep the morning glory’s mottled vines
From burrowing into the attic.

He thought God could really see me.
I thought God could really see me, too.
He touched the hair that I had curled delicately round my neck
told me to be careful of words, even the miraculous ones.

His mouth fell onto my mouth and I felt my bowels move
like the rumbling of a house at night in a storm.
Just once I knew what if felt like to be a puritan lady.

He said, “No baby. You are no baby.”
I rubbed the bottom of my foot on the grainy pavement.
My cat jumped into the pit of an empty flowerpot,
bored and suspicious.

He said my thighs were like apples
my skin like snow.
It was one of those white summer days.
We stood on opposite sides of a picket fence,
the points stood sharp as daggers.
His eyes were like a child eagerly asking for seconds.
I was always very polite and careful.

I thought he might want to steal me,
use me up to soothe his woe of spring,
drive over my pots to sew a garden
that could never ripen.

I held on to my daggers on the fence, but unlaced
the white strings that held together the bodice of my dress.
I showed him the places that I carved out life on my skin.
“These are my wings and here are my gills.”

I will use these to breathe when Greenland is gone.
I will use these to fly when they open my cage.

He told me that God was very happy with me.
He lifted me up until I felt lighter and lighter.
The heat rose from the concrete up my dress
around my thighs,
and he made a pie out of my apples, which he ate.
He stares at my windows now, 
leaning over the fence to water my peach tree, waving his hose 
when he sees me.

The water on the pavement smells like something from my childhood. 
After that I was introduced to the smell of a stranger, 
and learned to fill the devil’s mouth with the dangling parts of me.

About the Author

Hilary Beth Tellesen is a graduate student of English and a Composition instructor at 
California State University, Chico. She is a mother of two, an activist, an actor, a poet, a 
playwright, and at times a lunatic because of the many hats she wears. Her work tries to 
portray the insanity and the complex beauty of the relationship between the desires of the 
individual and the ideals of larger society.