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Chicken-Hearted

“It’s time you learn to scrub a chicken.”

Mama rarely cooked after working all day—her heart wasn’t in it. But a daughter should know how to sterilize

that pink, ominous cavern before she flew
away to salt her own kitchens: pry its legs apart
& reach inside to scoop as if the bird were pregnant.

When I moved out that winter, pregnant
& fat like nobody’s business but still too chicken
to tell Mama, I took up with a boy who tore apart

our cold piss apartment looking for the piece of his heart
he swore I’d eaten. He claimed it flew
into my belly & before I gave it back, I’d need to sterilize

it. So I ran around that goddamn flat with wipes to sterilize
every counter & crevice. Not only was I pregnant &
compulsive but news had spread that flu

had reached pandemic level—this time from swine not chickens.

I’d read that pregnant women were more susceptible to heart
failure. I figured that also meant the throbbing pink part

in my belly. I never studied anatomy, apart

from an odd encounter with a college boy who tried to sterilize
my body with his tongue. It didn't work but left heart-

shaped scars along my chest & thighs, each mark pregnant
with blood, a strawberry patch or the red wattle of a chicken.
I'd begun to waddle around in baggy sweats a few

weeks since seeing Mama. She'd suspected the "more than a few
pounds" I'd gained, flinging accusations, shredding me apart
for acting the slut I was. I'd heard it before—she'd squawk chicken

shrills until I broke down. She'd peck at me to sterilize
my body like the kitchen, the chicken, my own pink pregnant
belly ache. She'd have me scoop out my own heart

to make a point. But I don't think I could live without a heart.
I'd lived without anyone but Mama since the summer we flew
over the Grand Canyon away from dad. Mama was pregnant

then. That didn't last long. I was eleven when she clawed apart
the bathroom, not the kitchen, scrubbing the tub to sterilize
it for a bath, I'd guessed. I'd have asked but was too chicken.

The trick was to keep apart from her long enough for my heart
to sterilize itself & keep that pink baby from cleansers or flu
or Mama's broken chicken heart. The trick was to stay pregnant.

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