UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
RIVERSIDE

Poor White

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Creative Writing and Writing for the Performing Arts

by

Bonnie Lee Bolling

March 2010

Thesis Committee:
Christopher Buckley, Chairperson
Juan Felipe Herrea
Christopher Abani
The Thesis of Bonnie Lee Bolling is approved:

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_____________________________________

_____________________________________

Committee Chairperson

University of California, Riverside
To Oomah
Acknowledgements

I want to thank Melanie for being there whenever I need a shoulder to cry on.

Thanks also to Robert, Kim, and Jennifer who were my allies along the way. Without you I don’t know that this could ever be written. I am so lucky to have had you as friends in this program.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

One is Beating Her Brittle Wings ................................................................. 1
Poor White .................................................................................................... 2
August Snow ................................................................................................. 3
Sunday Morning on Chugach Mountain ....................................................... 4
Waiting At the Window in the Kingdom of the Sons ...................................... 5
When I Looked Up ......................................................................................... 6
After the Hockey Tournament ..................................................................... 7
Alone on Wolf Lake ....................................................................................... 8
Red Apples .................................................................................................. 9
The Game .................................................................................................... 10
Salt .............................................................................................................. 11
Night Sweats ............................................................................................... 12
Amish .......................................................................................................... 13
The River .................................................................................................... 14
Home ......................................................................................................... 15
Inanna Considers ......................................................................................... 16
The Houseguest ........................................................................................... 17
Coeds .......................................................................................................... 18
Sex on the Beach Is Also a Drink ................................................................. 19
Make for Yourself a Light .......................................................................... 20
One Is Beating Her Brittle Wings

You don’t believe the view
from this kitchen window,
how a lone butterscotch cat
is the only thing moving,
slinking through the wakin grass;
he wants to kill something small and warm.
And over there, the sea coughs and dips
beneath the weight of a hundred steel vessels sliding over.
Unseen, under black waves, fish in silver
or neon cloaks pass like silences
through cities of mottled light.
There is more. Here in the yard,
June beetles burrow up from tunnels,
their soft flesh transformed to exoskeleton.
thorax, six legs and wings. And behind
the back of your mind, for an instant,
you wonder what it is like for the first time,
having eyes. Terrible luck they are thrust
into that irresistible light of death so soon
after taking flight. But first, they slip
from their mysterious holes by the thousands.
One is beating her tiny, brittle wings.
She will lay her eggs on a dewdrop,
inside the velvet petal of blue morning glory.
She is spinning a protective sac for them,
with her hind-most pair of hands.
You won’t witness this metamorphosis or notice
what happens after the caterpillar hatches,
crawls back into her unknown world
through earthen doors, to gnaw turf roots
until she is gorged. You’ll never know
if she fears the rain coming down,
if she weeps in her sleep,
or turns over and dreams.

the whole of existence frightens me

—Kierkegaard
Poor White

Hands---pale, undersized.
A limp flour-sack dress.
Ventru Means sat behind everyone.
She sat in the back behind the boys.
on the boys’ side of the classroom.
She lived down below near the tracks,
near the creosote, gravel,
and lumps of bituminous.
Her father worked the mines.
He was sick. All the fathers
who worked the mines were sick.
Some got buried. The rope
at school turning for double-dutch
sounded like laughter, our songs pitchy
in those freighted afternoons, the air heavy
with smoke blown down from the city.
Ventru Means was skinny.
They kept her away from us.
Her hair was thin and black.
I never heard her voice.
I can’t remember her shoes.
But her eyes were not the eyes of a child.
Not like our eyes—guilty of nothing.
Once in winter, a cloud of shreds
broke free from pins on the clothesline,
and slapped in the wind.
And once, after morning flurries,
before they took her away,
I watched Ventru fall backwards
onto the white playground
to make snow angels,
hers body shivering in the cold,
and the sky swelling again,
and bleaching,
and her small arms pumping,
her small hips thrashing,
her smile unfurling,
her smile vanishing.