

Buttons

by Paula Ray

I collect words like buttons in jars--
each worn by a family member and
discarded like me, sitting here
seeking a match or close imitation
to blend in with others lined cunt to chin:
tiny torpedoes aimed at my mouth,
bombing my tongue for sin committed
between my legs.

Damned: devoted daughter.

Last night, I dreamt father bid me--strip
off your wool coat with itchy memories
hiding in fibers: scared infants clinging to breasts.

He wondered why I was bundled for winter
when it was summer as I shivered,
teeth chattering, stiff fingers
searching a button no longer mine.

I had sewn it onto Father's navy blazer,
before they cut it up the back to make it fit
across his bloated belly, then arranged
his hands like waxed fruit.

Orphaned, left staring at all those colors,
shapes, and sizes spread before me--possibilities
and false hope. Cold and alone-- kneeling
on marble, face in contorted stoned scream
like a mausoleum gargoyle,
head rattling loud as a jar of buttons
clinking inside a glass chamber

after being kicked--cracked bottom to lip.

This morning, I awoke without a coat,
looked into father's eyes--barely threaded
onto his soggy crepe paper face.

He swallowed a mouthful of pills.

I opened my switchblade mouth and sliced
through the scab of silence.

Out fell the missing button--iridescent mother
of pearl, small as a baby tooth
to be hidden
beneath my pillow.

Perhaps tonight while I dream,
father will replace it with a silver dollar
and lock my tooth in the safe
with the others.

