

FROZEN CHARLOTTE

A SEQUENCE

NICOLE COOLEY



FROZEN CHARLOTTE, A SEQUENCE

NICOLE COOLEY

a winner of the 2015 Essay Press
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selected by JENNIFER KWON DOBBS



#61

ESSAY PRESS CONTEST SERIES

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INTRODUCTION

– JENNIFER KWON DOBBS

“A Young Woman was frozen to death while riding to a ball.”

Mass-produced, sold for a penny, tucked under Christmas trees and inside puddings, the ubiquitous Frozen Charlotte, named after a dead young woman, gazed back at the girl caring for its bisque form, warning her against vices and guarding her secrets. Nicole Cooley’s *Frozen Charlottes, a Sequence* drops this doll “head down, in a cup” among other settings to ask what laws does it conserve and convey. Charged with an ambivalent yet fierce intimacy, Cooley plays between poetry and prose in precise language shifting a reader’s attention to a mother’s loss and a daughter’s rebellion.

*

I’m struck by the inventiveness of Cooley’s chapbook, which brings to mind Rainer Marie Rilke’s essay on Lotte Priztel’s 1913 exhibition: “the doll was so utterly devoid of imagination that what we imagined for it was inexhaustible.” Cooley interrogates this fetish work’s terror and tenderness. She never shatters the form or collects it behind protective glass. Her chapbook’s power lies in its permission to the dolls to outgrow their uses and to speak a range of experiences that disturb and delight.

For Kimiko Hahn

*

A Young Woman was frozen to death while riding to a ball.

—*The New York Observer*: January 1, 1840

Naked, arms molded to her sides, the doll can't move.
Drop her, head down, in a cup to cool tea quickly.

Sink her all night in a cocktail glass like a swizzle stick.
A girl to stir your drink! Her feet graze its silvered surface.

Plunge her body in. She can swim and spin
in a bath, or you could drown her in your dirty martini.

Come on, no harm done, you're just playing a game!

Boys only tease if they like you, I was told.

She won't drown. She's already dead.



Once upon a time on a winter night a young girl named Charlotte did not listen to her mother she rode in a sleigh with her lover to a ball she would not wear the silver wrap her mother offered her mother begged her mother pleaded her mother tried to tie it over her shoulders but Charlotte wanted her pale throat gleaming wanted her arms bare so the sleigh slipped through the forest for miles and miles and when the lovers arrived at the village Charlotte was iced and still and white as a wedding cake



Let's speak in praise of the frozen—

My first daughter asleep, her hands pressed flat against my face.

Onyx beads, black ice circling my neck, my mother's necklace.

My girls in the bath, underwater, eyes squeezed shut, sisters sealed under glass.

On the subway, each time the train tunnels under the river, how I hold my legs together.

How I hold my breath. I shut my body up like an umbrella tied and snapped too tight.

*

Need a large amount of Frozen Charlottes?

An orphanage of Frozen Charlottes could be yours for the taking.

You may bid. The reserve is not yet met. You have one more hour.

*Buy huge quantities
of salvaged frozen charlotte dolls
direct from Germany.
75 excavated glazed
Victorian frozen charlotte dolls
size 1-22 inches age 1860.*

Current Bid \$38.00

How many dolls do you want?

They could be broken, some may have chipped heads,
but these Frozen Charlottes are all clean.

Sold by the gross. Sold by the lot.

*

Frozen Charlottes (defn):

Once upon a time, there were dolls, named after a story *meant to teach a lesson—*

Once upon a time between 1850-1920, these dolls were made in
German factories.

Each was one inch tall. These girls were perfect insulation

against winter. If a doll was not intact she was stuffed
into the doll factory wall behind drywall with her sisters.

All of the stories you tell me are so fake, my older daughter says.

*

sent home from school for wearing open-toed shoes
sent home from school for a halter roped too loosely over my neck
sent home from school because I wore leggings instead of pants
sent home and told to change out of *that too short skirt*
sent home because of *spaghetti straps*
sent home to my mother because there was *dress code inspection*
and your daughter is not in accord

Now the mother I wish for a whalebone corset spun tight—
the always desired 20-inch *wasp waist*—
yet I wish to hold the edges of my mini skirt in my own hands,
to allow whoever I want beneath it.

*

I loved my t-strap shoes, color of skim milk, shoes only worn
on Wednesdays.

At Miggy's Ballroom Dancing Studio, in New Orleans, in 1978, I was
taught the foxtrot, the waltz, the cha-cha, the box step. Outside,
cars on their way to the Mississippi played The Village People. Cars
driven by other, older boys. Girls lined up on one side of the room
against the mirrors, boys on the other. And we waited. We'd been
told that if a boy asked us to dance the correct answer was always
no matter what *Yes thank you, yes.*

*

Frozen Charlottes (defn):

Penny Dolls

Solid Chinas

Pudding Dolls

Bathing Babies

Pillar Dolls

Living Dead Dolls

Dolls white as gravel scattered in a parking lot

A doll to fit on the surface of a spoon.

Hold her in your mouth—

her body tastes like chalk, bite her thighs, bite her bottom,
and you could choke—

*

Let's talk about who hid the dolls in ditches, in drywall,
in rock foundations. Who shoved their bodies hard

inside a wall to keep a factory warm in winter. Who
smashed the dolls together then sealed the wall with plaster?

Kidnapped girls—

Who will find them?

Like survivors after a crash, after a blast,
these girls are always post-earthquake, bodies covered in fine white ash.

*

What if this doll is my daughter and I don't want
to love her?
She is the size of my thumb.
Painted black hair
face too pinked, permanently flushed.
She is always ashamed.
Naked: no clothes fit on her body.
She can't walk.
She can't raise her arms
or her tiny clenched fists.
She is all body but
she won't hit me back.
I can't pry her fingers apart.

*

the low-rise jeans crescent of smooth belly
a pink crop top color of the pencil eraser I need for the multiple-
choice test
the jean skirt made by tearing off both legs
silver bra strap slipped over the shoulder
I'm the mother



In praise of white—

Baptismal dress for the babies, linen and itchy, single inherited dress
that made them both cry.

Oyster shells in the parking lot by the river where I kick up dust.

My wedding dress, skimming my shoulders, *might show too much skin*,
the tailor murmurs in the dressing room.

My half slip—*does anyone still wear those now?* my older daughter
asks—falling over my thighs like a rinse of cool water.

A muff I loved as a child, cylinder of fur where I stuffed my fingers
so I wouldn't touch myself.

Or how about the disposable mesh underwear the nurses made me wear

in the hospital as they wheeled me out after the first surgical birth?



My love, if you find me facedown,

lying in the snow would you save me, would you

pick me up so gently, cradle me, wrap the shawl back

over my shoulders and bring me back to life—

breathe into my lungs

warm my blue skin my pale mouth

with your own?

*

Mistake (defn):

To be in error.

To not understand

when the girl snaps her legs closed,

when she yanks her one-piece down over her thighs

she doesn't want you touching her she doesn't want

your fingers on her skin

*

*Once upon a time the parents of dead Charlotte mourned her and
the mother she suffered most doesn't the mother always suffer
most in grief the mother grew her hair long till it fell past her knees
hair to cloak her hair the color of bone color of eggshell*

*

My daughters are in the bath together I'm outside

the door no access to their bodies now

no body

that will fit now

in the bath with them so I will myself blank

I close my eyes to white

or they're Charlottes—

glazed only on their backs to float

unclothed

face side up to breathe

they drift on the surface ghostly

bodies sealed in lockets silent

oh my fairy tale dead girls

*

intrigued I yank the garment from the rack and alone in the store
I try on the tight second skin all tight weave no breathing I
smooth my black dress flat over my stomach my hipbones will
almost show why that supreme and terrible pleasure at a knob of
bone why that pretense of a body that has never held another
as if I was never a mother

Worn under your clothes! Made to help you disappear!

I won't tell my daughters



Steampunk jewelry—*perfect for Frozen Charlottes!*

Just wrap the doll in clock gears, twist copper wire over her hair,

each body the perfect size for a pendant.

Two dolls can be matching earrings that glitter and swing.

Glue a girl to metal backing to make a brooch.

Fill a jelly jar with bodies for future projects!

A doll sealed in a bottle.

A doll in a pocket watch.

A doll on a chain between my breasts.



I want a girl to stir my drink. *I want to be her*, the younger daughter says.

I want to wear a too-tight jacket, skirt slit to the waist.

A low-cut wedding dress.

*

Bite and bite and bite my naked body—

*

Can you hold the doll like language in your mouth?

*

The girls roll like stone, like marbles, they slip from my fingers, soap
in a saucer.

My tiny body doubles. Small and already ruined.

My Penny Babies: my Unblinking, Upright Good Daughters.

Cold and iced and priceless, beloved,

white as white out from a tiny bottle my older daughter gives me

to erase my most recent mistake.

*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Quoted material taken from Kay Desmonde, *Dolls and Dolls Houses*;
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and eBay.

*

AUTHOR BIO



Nicole Cooley grew up in New Orleans and now lives outside of New York City. She has published five books, most recently *Breach* and *Milk Dress*, both in 2010. She is the director of the MFA Program in Creative Writing and Literary Translation at Queens College-City University of New York, where she is a professor of English.





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