

Three Poems by Kelley Jean White

The Claddagh

Is it polite to ask about tattoos?
I can tell that the Claddagh is Irish.
The center of the design is a heart,
which means love, held by two hands—
that might mean family, friends, but the crown,
doesn't mean much to me. I think of pain,

of divided country, of personal pain
etched in, burned in, inked into a tattoo.
And that other pain, when the baby crowns—
you might be screaming, get your Irish
up, it might take anger to give birth, your hands
two fists pounding the mattress, and your heart

ready to explode. You give that same heart
to a husband, to six daughters. Now there's pain
for another daughter, at all those hands
clasping while a military tattoo
rings out in power, crushes the Irish
beneath yet another cruel foreign crown.

This is my heritage too. No crown
of red hair, but I'm a Kelley, my heart
as bound to some ideal of green Irish
eyes as this woman's. Do we share in pain
or pride? No mark on me. There's no tattoo.
I don't even have a ring on the hands

I use to lift her newest baby. Hands
I scrubbed and gloved before cradling the crown
of her small head in one palm. The man's tattooed

arms reach now for the baby, flaming hearts
screaming on his shoulders, red bands of pain
mark his biceps, they spell Irish:

it's a stereotype, this cop's Irish,
a good man, who takes this daughter's small hand.
I know he wants a son, see a little pain
in tears that are not quite joy, not yet the crown
of their life to give his name, his full heart
to another generation. Tattooed

on his wrist is pain, the crowned Sacred Heart
of Jesus burning: the Blessed Mother's Irish,
she wears the Claddagh. He'll get a 'Mom' tattoo.

The Teardrop

As if I didn't cry enough, I had it tattooed
right there, at the corner of my right eye,
had it done by a plastic surgeon when he tattooed
my lids with permanent eyeliner. Charged
an extra three hundred dollars, pricey,
but it's in a dangerous area, one slip baby
and, well, it's a needle in your eye. Gotta believe
I can hold that widow stare. Not that I'm a widow.
Got a man still alive but he's away. 'Nother five
years. So I'll drip another one every Christmas
till he's back. I don't mind if it makes you think
I'm a killer. Don't mind that respect. They say
it goes all the way back to Cain, got one when he killed
his brother. Yeah, I'd kill for him. But see,
that's the other part of it. He's killing me.
I'm alone. I'm dying. Dry. Turning into salt.

The Zodiac

He's got an Ankh on his forehead, on his chin's the Aztec sun (with thrusting tongue); on his neck's vampire Bat. There's a Celtic cross on his sternum above a Caduceus, a Dreamcatcher, a star of David, an Eagle Feather and an Arrowhead; on both palms the Hand of Fatima. Lord Ganesh sits over his solar plexus spinning some culture's Firewheel accompanied by an Eye of Horus and an Eye of Ra. (Please don't ask which one is which.) (He wears a circle of Hieroglyphics around his umbilicus: you don't want to know what it says.)

His mother's name is in Italics on his right deltoid, a rather smudged out Lotus inscribed 'Lola' above a Lightning bolt and Labrys on the left. The Jack of Hearts and Ace of Spades flank his hipbones; he wears Kali's necklace of skulls like a scapula. There's a fiery YinYang Sun & Moon burning on the small of his back, just below a Ninja throwing star, a watery Ohm, the letter Pi and the Pyramid from the dollar bill: a pentagram is sitting just above his buttock crack. Quetzalcoatl

sits below his navel flying a Jolly Roger with a Mermaid and a Fairy with a Puerto Rican Flag. Blind Justice with her Scales and Dagger Rose sits just above the pubis. (Thor's Hammer and a Viking Helmet are in a place where the sun's not likely to show;) there's a few scattered Unknown Arcana etched around one quadriceps; the Virgin of Guadalupe and Immaculate Heart of Mary ride just above his knees crowned by

Angel Wings. There's a Bio-hazard symbol on one ankle, the other has the Universal Poison X.

His head's been shaved revealing a YOUNGBLOOD Ambigram. And it's all tied together by a Glow-in-the-Dark Zodiac Belt.

Pediatrician **Kelley White** worked in inner city Philadelphia and now works in rural New Hampshire. Her poems have appeared in journals including *Exquisite Corpse*, *Rattle* and *JAMA*. Her most recent books are *TOXIC ENVIRONMENT* (Boston Poet Press) and *TWO BIRDS IN FLAME* (Beech River Books.) She received a 2008 Pennsylvania Council on the Arts grant.