

JESSICA BARKSDALE
How to Save Yourself If You're Choking

First, don't choke.
 Don't go to that party
 with the throat-sized grape appetizers,
 the tiny wieners wrapped with puff pastry,
 the black olives, the cherry tomatoes,
 the slippery stuffed mushrooms.

Don't prepare.
 Don't put on your new dress,
 zipping it up the back,
 imagining someone loved working that last half-inch.
 Don't brush your hair, stroke on the blush.
 Don't pick up that new purse and slip it
 over your arm.
 Don't imagine walking next
 to someone new as you head to his car.
 Forget the opened door, the kissed cheek,
 the hum of air as you sit
 alone for those three seconds, shifting
 in your seat until you are just right.

Don't go to the restaurant and order the rib-eye steak.
 Don't sit next to him with a glass of Burgundy.
 Maybe it's Cabernet. Who cares?
 You've stayed home to watch the show
 everyone is talking about.
 The barbeque with the dangerous fish?
 The overdone chicken thighs with the splintery bones?
 Forget about it.
 Scrub the toilet that no one but you will ever use.
 Mop the floors.
 Clean the windows, pane by pane.

Anything round or tubular or thick.
 Anything made for the casual one bite.
 Anything on a stick.
 Anything sticky.
 Anything sugary.
 Anything raw-meaty.
 Anything eaten with friends.
 Anything eaten with strangers.
 Anything served where there is laughter and joy and hope.
 Don't put any of it near your lips.
 Keep your lips shut.
 Keep your lips at home.