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Other: Poems

A thesis
presented to
the faculty of the Department of Literature and Language
East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
Master of Arts in English

by
Catherine Pritchard Childress
May 2013

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poetry

ABSTRACT

Other: Poems

by

Catherine Pritchard Childress

This creative thesis is a collection of original poems entitled *Other*. The poems in *Other* reflect my study of the aesthetics of poetry as well as that of how women are represented as poets and as the subject of poems. Some of these poems are the product of my particular interest in the use of persona. Most reflect my desire to achieve self-reflection, to write from my experiences and perception, while still maintaining the universality that is an essential element of successful poems.

The critical introduction situates my poems within the framework of the poetic mode Personal Classicism—poetry that is emotionally based but relies on formal techniques and controlled elements in order to maintain distance. My primary goal in the critical introduction is to link my poems to the Personal Classicist lineage, which includes H.D., Elizabeth Bishop, and Louise Gluck – to whom I will pay particular attention.

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Work in this manuscript has appeared, sometimes in different forms, in the following journals:

“Leah’s Aubade,” *Stoneboat*, forthcoming 2013

“Solo,” *Stoneboat*, forthcoming 2013

“Putting Up Corn,” *Southern Poetry Anthology: Tennessee*, forthcoming 2013

“Proposal,” *Southern Women’s Review* Winter 2013

“Hush,” *North American Review*, Winter 2012

“Instead of You,” *Cape Rock*, Summer 2012

“Her Gift,” *Kaimana: Literary Arts Hawaii*, Summer 2012

“Oeuvre,” *Kaimana: Literary Arts Hawaii*, Summer 2012

“Elegy for June Cleaver,” *A! Magazine for the Arts*, Spring 2011

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CHAPTER 1

OTHER: A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

It has been difficult for me to embrace the title of poet – more so to accept the adjectives that are often placed in front of that title, particularly “woman poet,” a label that at times seems just as restricting and condescending to me as “poetess” might have been to Sylvia Plath, whom Robert Lowell, in what is often construed as praise, referred to as “certainly not just another poetess.” However positively Lowell intended his comment, the implication that it has for Plath’s female contemporaries and those who follow cannot be overlooked. According to Lowell, who is, ironically, known as the pioneer of Confessional poetry, Plath is superior to her female contemporaries, but his so-called praise does not take into consideration her standing among her male counterparts. By restricting his assessment in this way, Lowell highlights the fact that there is a double standard which allows for men to write emotional, personal poems and still be considered superior to “poetesses,” who, like me, seek to prove that female subject matter is just as much a part of the universal as male.

The endeavor to achieve equality on the page certainly isn’t specific to Plath’s and subsequent generations. Russian poet Anna Akhmatova, whose poems are a generation removed from Plath, is known to have “hated the word poetess” and its negative connotations. However, in his introduction to her *Selected Poems*, Akhmatova’s translator D.M. Thomas notes, “If we call her by that name, it is in no condescending sense but from a conviction shared by many critics and readers that her womanliness is an essential element of her poetic genius, a something added, not taken away.” Though my first instinct is to resist the label “woman poet” as anything more than mere description of my gender and my profession, writing the poems in this collection taught me that womanliness *is* an essential part of my poetry. My willingness, like that of poets

Louise Gluck, Charlotte Pence, Martha Elizabeth, and others, to acknowledge both the power and vulnerability of not only the female body, but also the female psyche (a risk male poets are less inclined to take though they no doubt share the same feelings of power and vulnerability) certainly makes my distinction as a woman poet a “something added, not taken away” from poetry’s ongoing conversation.

Alicia Ostriker, a dominant voice in contemporary discussions about women’s poetry, argues that Women’s Poetry has emerged as its own “literary movement comparable to romanticism or modernism in our literary past” (7). She identifies five “original, important, and organically connected” elements, which are specific to and often present in women’s poetry: “The quest for autonomous self-definition;” the need to accurately represent our bodies; anger; the need for human connection; and “revisionist mythmaking (8). I question Ostriker’s designation of Women’s Poetry as a subgenre, which serves only to further segregate women from mainstream contemporary poetry, and I have further doubts about her use of these criteria as justification for the classification. However, these criteria are, in fact, present in many poems written by women. I initially rejected Ostriker’s argument outright—her suggestion that women use poetry to “reclaim what has always been theirs but has been stripped from them” (113). And although the poems in *Other* arrived replete with variations of Ostriker’s touchstones--my own search for identity; my need to exert control over my own body and to find a voice with which to speak about it; sometimes anger; always a connection to others; and perhaps of most importance, the element of revisionist mythmaking, which is vital to my series of persona poems—they were not written with any particular agenda in mind.

Each of these poems is the product of a unique image, experience, or exercise, and, with the exception of the persona poems, were not intended to share a theme. I do feel that these

poems accurately represent my distinct poetic voice. Poetic voice is described as “that sense of a unique something present on a page – an unmistakable something that becomes the mark of a writer, a way of saying things that is a writer’s own”(Addonizio, Laux, 115). Part of what makes every writer’s voice unique is subject matter, “the raw material of our experiences” (21) that we transform into the language of poetry. These poems were written over a span of two years. Their subject matter ranges from pedicures to beaver lodges. Yet the ease with which they came together to form a cohesive collection is remarkable to me and represents the growth I am most proud of—the development of my poetic voice.

Ironically, writing in other voices has been instrumental to the development of my own poetic voice. Most of the persona poems in this collection, “Other,” “Salome’s Ghazal,” “Leah’s Aubade,” “Bathsheba’s Bath,” “Queen Mother,” “Concubine,” and “Sarah,” were inspired by an assignment to write a letter poem to a recognizable character. When considering the subject of my poem I turned to the characters I know best. As a Baptist minister’s daughter, the characters I know best are Bible characters. However, what I know about these characters, particularly the women, seems skewed. As I reread the familiar story of Lot’s wife being turned to a pillar of salt, I realized that a man told me everything I knew about her—first Moses, then my father. A man told her story. It became imperative to me to tell her side of the story, so to speak. The result of that assignment, “Wife to Wife” is obviously not a persona poem, but rather a direct address to her in which I consider her point of view,

I imagine your skeptical exit
from the gates of Sodom,
walking toward your life,
the view stinging

your eyes like desert sand.
A clouded image of Lot,
who didn't fill your needs,
but satisfied his greed
when he pitched his tents

and sympathize with it:

I don't
condemn your trespass,
I commend you,
don't blame you
for wanting to stay
behind in a place
where you had friends,
unstained clothes,
a name.

“Wife to Wife” played a pivotal role in the turn my poems would take. It not only inspired me to think about how many other biblical women might be misrepresented or represented exclusively by men, but also to attempt to speak for them in my poems. Naturally, persona poetry provided the best vehicle through which to do that.

Persona is a Latin word, meaning mask. In its most literal sense, persona poetry is poetry in which the poet hides behind the mask of a created character. Often, especially for women, these poetic masks serve as a means to take risks —emotional, cultural, or political— on the page. Poet and critic Jeannine Hall Gailey posits, “persona poetry creates space for the silent or

slandered women in already-known mythologies and folktales.” Certainly contemporary poets and their critics have paid particular attention to the reinvention of mythical women in poetry. Both Louise Gluck in her books *The Triumph of Achilles*, *Meadowlands*, and *Averno*, and Charlotte Pence in *Weaves A Clear Night* have written to reframe Penelope’s role in *The Odyssey*, challenging the accepted reading of her as a faithful, long-suffering wife and presenting her rather as independent and decisive. In the second in a series of seventeen poems identified by number only, Pence says of Penelope, “In one version of the story, I wasn’t the faithful / wife of Odysseus. I was like any woman” (ll. 1-2). Similarly, Gluck portrays Penelope as the seductress calling her the “perpetually undressed one” (1) and urging her to “call out to Odysseus over the open water, over the bright water... Who / wouldn’t want you” (ll. 11-13). This attempt by female poets to speak for mythical women; to subvert the stories that have been assigned to them primarily by men, is what Ostriker calls “revisionist mythmaking.” She defines revisionist mythmaking as:

a poet employing a figure or story previously accepted and defined by a culture [typically a patriarchy]. The poet is using myth, and the potential is always present that the use will be revisionist—that the figure or tale will be appropriated for altered ends, the old vessel filled with new wine, initially satisfying the thirst of the individual poet but ultimately making cultural change possible (213)

In most cases the connections my poems have with Ostriker’s theories are coincidental and while I did not have her revisionist theory in mind when I wrote the persona poems, it was certainly my intent, as she suggests, to subvert patriarchal representations of biblical woman—to consider their stories with a fresh perspective. In the essay “On Women’s Poetry” Eleanor Wilner

suggests that foundation texts like the Bible represent women as “silent or anonymous figures who did not make history but suffered it” (325). If indeed women’s persona poetry creates space for silent women then certainly Biblical women, like Leah, Salome, Hagar, Sarah, Bathsheba, and Mary Magdalene, who are silenced by the tenets of the very religion they represent, should be represented in poetry as I have attempted to do.

I also use persona as a technique for achieving distance and control over emotional subject matter. In her book, *The Veiled Mirror and the Woman Poet*, Elizabeth Dodd introduces a poetic mode called personal classicism—a method she defines as “poetry founded on emotion, primarily familial and sexual love, often based on the writer’s own experience” (6). Dodd suggests that the use of personae or any formal technique serves to “mute the sense of an autobiographical speaker no matter how intimate the tone” (6). Very few of the poems in *Other* are strictly autobiographical; however, many of them reflect sensitive subject matter and are inspired by my experiences and perceptions. For the same reasons that Sylvia Plath is considered a “poetess” because of her emotional subject matter, while Robert Lowell is lauded as father of the Confessional school for the same emotional poems, I find it necessary to ground some of the emotional and explicit poems within a formal structure like personae, situating *Other* in Dodd’s personal classicist mode.

The title poem of this collection, “Other,” considers the crucifixion from the point of view of Mary Magdalene, who, in seeking to define her relationship with Christ determines only what she is not—she is not one of his disciples, not his mother, not his beloved cousin and friend John, not even the preparer of his body, and certainly not his wife. She is perhaps mistress—unquestionably bystander and other. She is undefined—a condition that unites the subjects of most of these poems. Though my speaker is undefined in that she has no title, no named

relationship to Jesus, I, like so many women (poets and otherwise), find that my lack of autonomous self-definition, to the degree that it exists, is the result of too many relationships, too many titles—student, daughter, mother, wife. All of which describe me in part, none of which accurately reflects me as a self-determining woman with interests, needs, and desires separate from these sundry relationships. This collection's title, *Other*, indicates the poet's quest for "autonomous self-definition," as well as that of the subjects of many of the collection's poems. Several poems in this collection including, "Marriage Vows," "Instead of You," "Elegy for June Cleaver," and "Putting Up Corn" examine issues inherent in marriage that often impede women's ability to develop and maintain an identity separate from the title *wife*.

In *The World's Wife*, a collection of persona poems, Carol Ann Duffy considers mythical, historical, and literary wives and the varying degrees to which they feel defined, in fact are defined, by marriage and motherhood. Duffy's poem "Thetis," named for the Greek goddess best known as Achilles's mother, draws on Thetis's mythical status as a shape shifter, a power she used unsuccessfully to avoid a marriage arranged for her by Zeus, to highlight the ways in which women are traditionally required to reconstruct themselves, indeed sacrifice their individual identities, when they become *someone's wife*—*someone's mother*. Even the possessive indicators in the phrases, *someone's wife* and *someone's mother*, amplifies the traditional construct of marriage and motherhood, which demands that women forego their autonomy becoming instead, subject.

Duffy begins "I shrank myself" (l.1), declaring the first of many metamorphoses Thetis, acting on the page as a representative of all women, undergoes while making the transition from woman and individual, to wife, and finally mother. Thetis claims that she "shrank herself / to the size of a bird in the hand / of a man" (1-3), but in this attempt to fit within the prescribed

confines of marriage, she is crushed by “the squeeze of his fist” (6). Her subsequent attempts to mold herself to the needs of this man are met with similar responses. She becomes “albatross” only to have her “wings / clipped by the squint of a crossbow’s eye” (12); “Mermaid, me, big fish, eel, dolphin, / whale, the ocean’s opera singer” (27-8) only to fall victim to “the fisherman... / with his hook and his line and his sinker” (29-30); and “raccoon, skunk, stoat, / to weasel, ferret, bat, mink, rat” (32-33) only to succumb to “The taxidermist’s sharpened knives” (34). All of Thetis’s efforts to link her own identity to that of her husband, to label herself wife, are met with increasingly more devastating results, leading up to Duffy’s final stanza in which Thetis asserts

Then my tongue was flame
and my kisses burned,
but the groom wore asbestos.
So I changed, I learned,
turned inside out – or that’s
how it felt when the child burst out.

Thetis is unable to transform herself successfully into anything pleasing to her husband. He is even impervious to her kisses. However, she relinquishes part of herself every time she changes while attempting to meet his needs, a theme I echo in the lines of “Transpired.” in which a different woman’s man tears apart

The sturdy blocks of resistance she placed
Methodically, to keep out men like him,
Who see their own worth reflected in her
Eyes, construct themselves of her, limb by limb

From fragments, pieces, parts she surrenders
In breath so soft he can hardly foreknow
The whispered goodbye her eyes quietly show.

“Transpired” suggests that the woman intends to reclaim the “parts she surrenders,” and thus, reassert her autonomy unlike Thetis, who continues to be defined by others and eventually turns herself “inside out” for the sake of another identity—mother—a name no more hers than wife.

Though Ostriker makes a clear distinction between the search for identity found in women’s poetry and the need to represent women’s bodies accurately, I would argue that there is a direct relationship between the two. It is precisely the search for identity that results in the need for women to represent themselves accurately as sensual, sexual beings, both on and off the page. It is this identity—this representation—that is still most often denied by literary convention, where women’s writing about their bodies has been labeled as “inartistic,” and as “evidence of the writer’s shallowness, narcissism, and unseemly aggressiveness” (Ostriker 92). Similarly, to discuss one’s body not only in sexual terms, but also as related to menstrual cycles, giving birth, breastfeeding, and even aging is considered taboo by some cultural mores, particularly the culture in which I was raised and now live and write. As a self-aware woman and poet it seems the ultimate betrayal of my self and my craft to sidestep the body, “the most literal ground of female experience” (Michie 128), in my poems.

In her introduction to *Impertinent Voices: Subversive Strategies in Contemporary Women’s Poetry*, Liz Yorke posits that “in daring to speak freely, impudently, even presumptuously about their bodies and their sexuality women are seriously calling into question the conventional logic of patriarchal discourses.” I am certainly aware that the current representation of women in literature and the esteem in which women writers are now held

hardly compares to the attitude towards women writing in the 19th and even early 20th century. However, my poems that deal with sex and the body explicitly are still received with some hesitation and are still considered risqué in some company. So, while the poems in this collection like “Oeuvre,” “Her Gift,” “Proposal,” and “Seduction” are meant primarily to write what is readily available to me—women’s experiences—and not necessarily to “question the conventional logic of patriarchal discourses,” the fact that poems which call attention to issues like sexual abuse, infidelity, and desirability are still shocking suggests that the discourse needs to be challenged until female subject matter is no longer questionable and becomes instead, universal.

In seeking to make the female experience ubiquitous in poetry, I join a long line of poets including Elizabeth Bishop, Sharon Olds, Louise Gluck, and Martha Elizabeth who, to varying degrees, highlight the female body in their poems. In her book, *The Return of Pleasure*, Martha Elizabeth considers the female body in a variety of ways: the “fat” in a child’s “foot, / a little pale slab of it under the blood / like the rim on a slice of ham” (l.15-17), in “The Days of Plenty,” the “knobby knees” in “Ode to Knee,” and the comprehensive cataloging of the kiss in “The Lovers’ Kiss,” in which Elizabeth begins, “For the angle of the wrist of the loving curve of hand / approaching one’s face, we have no translation, / only the kiss that follows” (1-3). She continues by describing

the social kiss, the lips merely an extension of palm,
a goldfish salute,
and the kiss which is the eating of fruit, lips in a pout
on plum, a child’s kiss on the cheek, of the child asleep,
mouth open on fist (9-14)

all before sensually detailing the lovers kiss,

... which is always unfinished—
the flesh giving until the lovers
rest on their bones, limbs woven,
gathered together into sweetness—
... lips sensitive as fingertips, parted,
tasting, heart in mouth,
sweet sour bitter salt,
the return of pleasure.

The language in this poem is not overt, not sexually explicit, yet Elizabeth adeptly evokes the pleasure of a lingering kiss, a pleasure that is certainly a universal experience, but one that is often left to women to articulate. In my poems “Seduction” and “Proposal” I attempt to convey desire and desirability just as unobtrusively as Elizabeth does in “The Lovers’ Kiss.”

“Seduction” considers not an existing desire but the memory of passion and the possibility of its return in these lines:

I don’t know the last time someone wanted me,
skimmed my jawline with fingertips
traced the hollow above my collarbone,
kissed the freckles on my shoulders one by one,
kneaded the length of my spine, small of my back.
It had been so long, I no longer recognized
the ritual, the moves—

In “Proposal,” desire is treated not only as a physical response but also as an emotional one. Neither physical nor emotional fulfillment is available to the subjects of this poem. The means to articulate feelings is similarly unavailable to them, so the body becomes both the call and response as she finds herself

yielding to the urge
of this man kneeling at her feet...
Just a man on his knees
his face buried in her softening stomach
his lips begging her to respond.

My poems depend on narrative much more than Elizabeth’s lyric poem. Still, both her direct address to the reader and my use of particular characters and settings highlight the body not only as the locus of sexual experience and desire but also as central to non-sexual relationships and experiences.

In order to represent the woman’s body accurately and completely in poetry, it is imperative to consider not only the body as an object of sexual desire and the site of sexual fulfillment, but also as child bearer, nurturer, and victim of the aging process which tires and deteriorates. *The Return of Pleasure* considers the female body extensively. Elizabeth’s poems depict the intricacies of a woman’s face, women learning the positions of ballet, detailed descriptions of their elbows and knees, and seeking relief from a migraine headache brought on by the cares of an ordinary day. In “As the Migraine Turns” Elizabeth’s speaker finds that in the “strange borderland of eased pain” (l.10), “there’s music” and that there is relief from the “prickle-neck / or scaly clutch through skull” (6-7) “When we first danced / and you changed the pace / to see if I would follow, and I did” (31-33). Similarly, my speaker in “Pedicure” finds

relief for her feet, tired from “late nights at the kitchen sink” and “throb of high heels / striking sidewalk and stairs” when she “surrenders” to the “exotic chatter,” “skilled hands,” and “lithe fingers” of the pedicurist. Admittedly, both poems rely on sensual language to convey a sense of soothed pain. Still, the focus remains on the effects women’s quotidian routines have on their bodies. In fact there cannot be a more “literal ground of female experience” than the migraine headache in Elizabeth’s poem and the tired, achy feet in my poem, both symptoms of an average day. In “Marriage Vows” the speaker’s unshaven legs represent her attitude toward marriage. In “Oeuvre,” “Her Gift,” and “The Cinnamon Peeler’s Wife,” poems that depict sexual situations, the body becomes the subject of the poem. And in “Pyre” the body is sacrificed and becomes representative of death when the speaker instructs her husband:

Split the wood, prepare the pyre, shroud me in red,
lay me on a bed of oak, throw the first torch,
kindle the consuming fire, dance in my smoky haze,
wail your grief, then surrender my body to the blaze.

I cannot say that I wrote these or any of the poems in *Other* with a particular goal in mind, but I am committed to a piece of advice I received when I first began to write poems, “write the poems that offer themselves to be written—all of them, and when they come.” Like any poet, male or female, the words and images that offer themselves are often particular to my perceptions and experiences. And as a woman, more as a mother, many of those experiences are bound up in the body and in the womanliness that was essential to Ahkmatova’s poetry and I believe, my own.

While this collection of poems reflects my desire not only to be accurately represented as a woman but also to accurately portray other women, it does not represent me completely as a

poet, nor does it typify the poets whom I consider examples and influences. The parameters of this project dictate that I consider the poets and poems with which my work has most in common. Naturally, poems as female-focused as the ones in *Other* have subject matter in common with other women poets. Over the past two years I deliberately focused on women poets in order to better understand the poems I was writing—poems that originally felt out of character for me—and to situate my own poems within a broader context. In seeking out poems written by females and about female experiences I discovered Louise Glück, Charlotte Pence, and Martha Elizabeth. Their books are never far from my reach. And although Margaret Atwood’s persona poems were quite valuable when considering the technique, generally speaking her poems do not resonate with me. I have identified women’s subject matter in poets I have long admired but would not normally consider Women Poets as defined by Ostriker. For example, Elizabeth Bishop, who writes artfully about both the “shiny entrails” of a “venerable” fish and a girl’s grappling to locate herself as a member of her gender in “In the Waiting Room.” Interestingly, some of the most evocative uses of sensual language and imagery in the poems I have studied extensively have been by men. Michael Ondaatje’s *Secular Love* is one of the books I read most often in the early stages of this project. My reading and rereading of his collection precedes most of *Other*’s poems and though in most cases I was not directly aware of his influence while I was writing and I certainly would not presume my poems are comparable, echoes of Ondaatje’s subtle, yet sensuous lines are present in “Seduction,” “Proposal,” “Pedicure,” and “(Self) Portrait in Clay.” “The Cinnamon Peeler’s Wife,” one in the series of persona poems, is a direct response to Ondaatje’s “The Cinnamon Peeler.” Like Ondaatje, Pablo Neruda portrays the female body and sensuality in more vivid language than many female poets. His are another example of the poems to which I have returned again and again while

writing my own poems for *Other*. So, my reading and therefore my influences for these poems, certainly has a broader scope than predictable women poets” like Plath, Atwood, and Gluck. Further, the poems of those whom I consider personal favorites from James Wright and Richard Hugo to my own mentors and friends, Jesse Graves, Don Johnson, and Linda Parsons Marion have little in common with the poems in *Other*; however, their influence has been instrumental in improving my craft. In many ways, it is this influence that will best serve me as I continue to develop and grow as a poet, whatever the subject matter of a particular collection of poems.

Only that which is the other gives us fully unto ourselves.

~Sri Yoganando

Wife to Wife

Wife to Wife

My father admonished me
to remember you.
He couldn't have known
how I would heed
his warning. I don't
condemn your trespass,
I commend you,
don't blame you
for wanting to stay
behind in a place
where you had friends,
unstained clothes,
a name.
I imagine your skeptical exit
from the gates of Sodom,
walking toward your life,
the view stinging
your eyes like desert sand.
A clouded image of Lot,
who didn't fill your needs,
but satisfied his greed
when he pitched his tents.
Looking back was better
than blindly following
a father who offered
your daughters' virtue,
kept his honor
locked behind doors,
conspired with angels
who lauded his intentions,
grieved his union
with an impure wife.
My father warned me
of the wrath
that changed you
to a pillar, scattered you
throughout that razed city,
but he didn't know you
were the one
with power to cleanse,
couldn't fathom teaching me
just how much you are worth.

Oeuvre

Oeuvre

A real boyfriend would've cared
I was only twelve, still jailbait,
never had a slow, wet kiss, mouth
full of wrestling tongues, never
found my G-spot or knew
I had one, that his plans
for the backseat would wound
more than a pink crescent
between baby-fat thighs,
the thin layer of dignity
I cleaved to with zeal of backwoods
religion sacrificed for a few quick,
dry strokes. Would have offered
a rag for the blood, comfort in his arms,
not his chest heaving against me
again and again
pounding out his body of work.

Solo

Solo

That summer, I earned my keep
singing Saturday nights in a bar,

serving Pabst on tap between sets
Of Lorrie Morgan and Sammi Smith's

"Help me Make it Through the Night,"
requested at least three times each week

by Tim, who taught me the two-step
after-hours, circling the concrete floor,

a soaring raptor, sizing up prey,
holding me closer than the steps called for.

Still reeling, I followed his lead
to a seedy motel. His quickquick, slow,

slow rhythm, mastered on the dance floor,
pulsed long after his misstep in bed,

where I cradled him in my arms,
softly singing him to sleep.

Salome's Ghazal

Salome's Ghazal

I left my veils in the laps of men, for whom I danced,
'round necks, wrists—In this silken costume, I danced.

At a birthday celebration befitting a lascivious king
Planned by my mother, a gift for her groom, I danced.

Your guests witnessed you pledge your solemn oath,
To grant my wish, so in your reception room, I danced.

Fire from terracotta lamps flickered off my jeweled breasts
Kindling your improper desire, perfumed, I danced.

Thinking of John who refused my tenacious advances,
Swaying to the suggestion of his coming doom, I danced.

Gratified by my performance, you promised to make good.
To sate the desire that leaves me consumed, I danced.

Reluctantly you delivered his head on a bloody tray,
Dressed his body, buried him, and at his tomb, I danced.

Marriage Vows

Marriage Vows

When she stood before God and all those witnesses to say I Do
What she really meant was *I Don't. I Won't.*
She meant *You've got to be kidding me.*
Who really wants to spend the rest of her life with some poor, old, sick guy?
What she meant is *I don't intend to wash your clothes or wear lipstick anymore.*
I won't walk barefoot in your kitchen.
I promise to gain as least twenty pounds, to honor my Daddy's name,
And to obey a plethora of self-help books.
She could have meant I Do.
I do have a mind of my own, my own life, friends, and taste in music.
I do know how to order take out and maintain separate accounts,
She meant with this ring *I will have a headache.*
I will leave the lights on so I can read. I will snore while you sleep.
I will constantly breathe down your neck and in your face with morning breath.
I will forsake shaving my legs from the knee up
Until Death Do Us Part.

Pedicure

Pedicure

When I asked for red, he motioned to a palette
of polish—*Dutch Tulips, California Raspberry,*
Malaga Wine, An Affair in Red Square. My only task
to choose—decide what this man, whose words
I can't understand, will stroke on my canvas
when I lie back in the bulky arms of his chair,
slip my feet into a burning basin, surrender to
his skilled hands, versed in exposing tender layers.
I offer him ankle, calf, shallow impression behind my knee,
barely hear his exotic chatter while he kneads away
late nights at the kitchen sink, throb of high heels
striking sidewalk and stairs. I nestle deep
into those strong arms as lithe fingers smooth neglect,
nurture muscle, flesh, render feeling full to my fiery toes.

Instead of You

Instead of You

I buried the wild oats,
ones I'd sown with you
on the wrong side of a bar,
in the wrong bed,
deep in the dark familiar soil of home.

Covered them over
with a patchwork quilt
pulled from a chest
filled with every hope except my own.
Forgot them

when I wore Mama's white lace,
set a farmhouse table
with Wedgwood china
and three highchairs,
made supper, made love, put away dishes,

put down roots
with a boy who was raised right,
right here
in this place where I returned
when I left you by the murky water

you loved so much
though I never knew why
before we held hands on the pier
then plunged to the secret bottom,
our toes in sultry mud,

tangled legs and hearts
moved by a current
too strong for a hidden cove and
a sheltered girl,
lying bare beside you

and the water we shared.
Holding hands, we said
good-bye
to a possibility
that wouldn't be veiled in white
where sometimes I return

and dig deep in the mire
to exhume a desire
that can't be contained in a cedar box
at the foot of this wrong bed.

Leah's Aubade

Leah's Aubade

I know I am not the one you bargained for,
not the one you labored in the fields
for seven years to marry. I am the wasted
bride price, the one who came to you veiled
in my father's deceit, pretending to be the woman
who will dutifully tend your sheep,
carry water from the well where you first fell in love
with Rachel whose kiss made you cry.

This morning shines on bitter tears
glowing in the aftermath of your surprise.
Too drunk last night to notice whose bed you shared,
to sense my body's subtleties, discern my cries,
you waken to the wrong life, find me
good enough to share your bed, bear your sons
but not enough to keep you from the fields
haggling, again, for a wife.

Putting Up Corn

Putting Up Corn

In August, he places a bushel bag at my feet
bursting with pride at the sweet corn he brings
from the rusty bed of an old man's truck.
Three dollars a dozen will cost me
eight hours. Shucking, silking, washing, cutting
cooking what could be bought
from the freezer section where I find
green beans our mothers would plant,
pick, cook and can, planning
for hard winter which might not come,
hungry children who would.

I peel back rough, green husks to reveal
too many teeth that need brushing, smiling
knowing smiles because he has delivered
my submission.

I strip silk with a small brush
turning each ear over in my hand,
a rosary said to the blessed mother
whose purity he thinks I lack.

*Our Father who art in Heaven, I didn't do the dishes today
Hail Mary, full of grace, I don't own an iron.
Glory be to the Father, I speak my mind.
Hail Holy Queen, I called for take out again.*

I cut each kernel lose with a sharp blade.
Shave away what I believe in, what he would change,
scrape the cob and my soul clean
leaving nothing behind.

I place a dozen gallon bags at his feet
bursting with my sweet-corn yield,
in a kitchen where I don't belong, planning
for hard winter which might not come,
hungry children who will.
Made as reparation for being
the woman I am, placed in a freezer
where each time a bag is removed
he will be reminded that once, in August,
I was the wife he wished for.

Elegy for June Cleaver

Elegy for June Cleaver

It took only thirty minutes, once each week
for you to set the bar I try to hurdle
but limbo at best, finding how low I can go.
If not for you, he would never expect a kiss
and cold drink at the door, instead
of juice-box and crying child.
You taught them that six p.m. brings meatloaf,
mashed potatoes, bread from scratch, a lesson
I un-teach with cardboard boxes of pizza.
Thanks to you, the woman of my husband's dreams,
he thinks he married Roseanne.
Patiently, you nurtured Wally and "The Beav,"
hosted play-dates for boys with funny names
like the ones I call my own boys behind their backs,
over wrinkled laundry that I don't iron.
Finally you can get some rest
in a hardwood box, polished lemon fresh.
Kick off your heels, while I kick up mine.
Shed those pearls, lose the lipstick.
But be sure not to leave your apron behind.

Out In The Dark

Out In The Dark

A Response to Claudia Emerson's "Pitching Horseshoes"

Never content being my wife, you seek more
in the pages of your books. Offer yourself
to the white sheets you scribble on, then revise,
scratching out any chance for me to hold you.

You spend hours at your grandmother's desk,
Between me and the coffee mug you painted
green with red cherries, forever reaching
for what sustains you through all-nighters,

leaving me to slip from your side into the shade
of the oak tree out back, where I built a flowerbed
for the first birthday you celebrated in this house.
Hosta, Impatiens, and Bleeding Hearts submit

to weeds that thrive under your neglect,
roots holding on tight. Your reading lamp glares
from your bedroom window, asserting
your coveted solitude, casting just enough light

for me to see the stakes you drive me to night
after night, trudging the length of the pit,
hoping for a ringer, always adjusting my grip,
deciding when to release, when to hold on.

Her Gift

Her Gift

She gave me yellow sunglasses, revealed my husband
who traced the angles of her face with fingertips
smoothed by sandpaper, held her hand
beneath frothy dishwater while I cleared each place,
grazed her shoulder, her breast, her thigh, her ass,
when she passed through French doors to my porch,
sucked meringue from her fingers when she came
with my favorite coconut pie, one she'd baked from scratch,
made her bottom lip bleed with his teeth when lips and tongue
weren't enough, clutched her small breasts, found her thrusting
nipples with his thumbs, shuddered in her body's grip,
left sheets I placed fresh on the bed before work stained
in their aftermath - sweat, semen, stench.

Other

Other

“...There were also women looking on from a distance,
among whom was Mary Magdalene”

Mark 15:40

Your chosen men returned
to their homes, their nets,
their doubts. Could not watch you
force final, shallow breaths
into your lungs, bearing down
on the same feet I wet with tears,
wiped clean with my hair,
muscle and flesh tearing away
as you cried out to your Father.

I wiped your mother's tears,
listened to you offer
forgiveness to the thieves
beside you, waited to hear you
call my name, prayed you could see
me there, not forsaking you,
not betraying you, not leaving
you, but longing for you
to finally acknowledge me.

You beheld her and your beloved
John before you died, but I was left
to follow your cold body,
stand silent while a stranger held you
in his arms, sheathed you in silk
and perfume, laid you in a dark tomb.
Still I waited, believing you would come
for me, not leave me, three days
later, crying again at your feet.

Composing

I dreamed you in another life,
red shirt striped with blues,
brown suspenders crossed
sinewy shoulders still bearing the toil
of your ancestral farm,
met denim and your wiry waist.
Close and cropped replaced wheat
tresses. Bearded face, free of silver
that marks it now like streak'ed meat
simmering in your mama's bean pot.
Hands not yet an instrument
of stirring words, but tanned tools,
toughened by hoe and plow,
tender on my skin. Surveying
the lay of the land with cornflower
eyes that now peruse my pages
for a self I once shared with you
not contained between hard-bound
covers, windowless walls—propriety.
We grew together, each kneading
new ground, harvesting meaning,
a lexis to carry into this life
where we pass fingertip to fingertip
across a sturdy wooden desk.
Paper and ink whispering
what mustn't be said aloud.

(Self) Portrait in Clay

(Self) Portrait in Clay

Her certainty that she had chosen the right man
to capture her balanced his feelings
of inadequacy when he studied his hands
toughened by a life spent flaking stone
with hammer and chisel, one fragment at a time,
struggling to reveal his Galatea at the center
of one cold rock after another, gnarled knuckles
mangled by each miscalculation.

When her clay yielded to his calloused hands
he knew he had found his medium,
then flawlessly, he shaped her—
contoured earlobes, jawline, and nape
kneaded the small of her back, her hips,
hollowed her navel—his perfect thumbprint,
fired her white hot, his hands sure.

Transpired

Transpired

Rushed wind carried his whisper to her ear,
Do you think he knows I'm in love with you?
His cautious way of saying how he feels.
The games of a child, played by a man who
Doesn't want to presume to know her heart,
Though he could divine the lines in her face
Like dark leaves in a cup, tearing apart
The sturdy blocks of resistance she placed
Methodically, to keep out men like him,
Who see their own worth reflected in her
Eyes, construct themselves of her, limb by limb,
From fragments, pieces, parts she surrenders
In breath so soft he can hardly foreknow
The whispered goodbye her eyes quietly show.

Bathsheba Bathing

Bathsheba Bathing

I was aware of your leering
when I dropped my robe,
dipped one foot into the tub,
eased my calf inch by blistering inch,
testing the waters to see
if my friends were right
about the way you look at me
when I walk into a room
with the man who defends your crown.

It was no accident you were there
that day taking in the view
from your palace roof
or that I moved into sight
just in time to see
the corners of your mouth
curl to invitation.
Response bubbled past my thighs,
slipping deeper into the heat.

Queen Mother

Queen Mother

When I stepped from the burning water onto my roof
I knew you would make me queen, would watch the Mikveh
Wash me pure, ready for the seed your smile promised.

I didn't know you would ordain Uriah's death, that your god
Would smite our firstborn son—retribution for the so-called sin
That made me finally your wife, secured my place in the bed

Where I conceived a king, watched you die—but not before
I arranged your last wish, removed Adonijah from his throne,
His mother from my palace, secured my place in the legacy,

made Solomon your heir. Our fourth son, eighth in line,
not our first, now dead, his birthright stripped by a man
Jeremiah calls your son, twenty-eight generations removed,

the alleged *King of the Jews*, descendant of my tainted line.

Seduction

Seduction

I should have realized when he stopped
at the overlook eager to show me the view
of his mountains, his home—to share
not too distant high school memories

of hiding six-packs from his mother.
When he treated me to a buffet lunch,
timidly pushed his food around his plate
while I ate, I should have known—

but I can't remember a man courting me.
Handholding and dinner dates gave way
to the garage and Sports South years ago—
I don't know the last time someone wanted me,

skimmed my jawline with fingertips
traced the hollow above my collarbone,
kissed the freckles on my shoulders one by one,
kneaded the length of my spine, small of my back.

It had been so long, I no longer recognized
the ritual, the moves—Couldn't see anything
but a boy who said finally, I spent the summer
learning the notes to your favorite song—

then he played “Dance Me to the End of Love.”
I watched his lips purse, then part, in a whispered tune,
his hands move along the length of the guitar's neck,
his fingertips pluck and strum, coaxing a familiar chord.

Hush

Hush

I parked beside a winding mountain road
to gather Black-Eyed Susans for Mom
and courage to round the next bend – a sharp left
onto my father’s farm where I once hid
in the hayloft with Jason Martin, taking turns
reciting poems, safe from the ridicule of real men.
Those lost afternoons buried a secret deeper
in me than the paperbacks tucked beneath
tawny bales, the one I’d come to tell Dad now.
He wants me to marry a nice girl, punch a time card,
ssshhh crying babies while the woman gets supper.
Wishing, for his sake, I wanted that too
will provide little comfort when I see his face
in my rear view mirror, broken after I’ve laid bare
a future that began with whispering in his barn.

Proposal

Proposal

He pulled her against him,
his fingertips resting in pale striations
across her hips,
marks of the life she leaves behind
when she closes her eyes
in dream,

Or is it prayer
that finds her yielding to the urge
of this man kneeling at her feet,
offering what he can only give
cloistered in these trees,
dirt piercing his skin through denim,
tears betraying her behind tinted glass,
as she looks down on his silent appeal.

There was no ring boxed in black velvet,
his well-rehearsed speech spent on another
no promise

(never a promise)

not even three little words.

There was no question.

Just a man on his knees
his face buried in her softening stomach
his lips begging her to respond.

Sarah

Sarah

I wanted only for Hagar to have my son.
How could I have known she would love
My husband, that when I asked him
To send her and Ishmael away his face
Would reveal he loved her too,
That I was right when I guessed
He was in her bed (long after she conceived),
That he was thinking of her
When he hummed in the fields,
When I caught his distracted gaze,
When he kissed me goodnight.

My barren body cannot compete
With the thrill he must feel
When the soft curves of her youth
Respond again and again to his touch,
Cannot elicit his body's firm response
with only the light pressure of an ankle
against his calf, the brush of a hand
on his forearm, a probing tongue—
cannot bear to see his eyes follow her
As she braids her hair, nurses their son,
Cannot watch her become my husband's wife.

Concubine

Concubine

Sarah said I should be happy

I am the one
whose pleasure comes without condition,
the one who folds into his arms for a moment of release,
whose body still responds to his bidding,
giving him his first, if not favored, son.

She said I should be happy

I am not the one
who folds his linens into stacked squares,
plucks the field's debris from his beard,
not the one who lathers his pubic hair into my own
with shared soap, is stirred by his sleep sounds,
that his is not the first face I see each day.

She said I should be happy,

which is easy for her to say.

The Music of that Night

The Music of that Night

The overture swelled, filling the Majestic Theater as I waited for the curtain to rise on *The Phantom of the Opera*, flooding me with thoughts of you, of the night you lifted me from sleep, led me to the sailboat's deck to let the breeze pull us away from the home we were tearing down one cold stare, silent meal, one angry word at a time.

I imagine the blue quilt you draped around my arms when the wind picked up past the point. Ours was the only boat on the lake, so you dropped anchor in deep water, blasted the CD you took from my car, music you never listened to but you hoped the gesture might win me back. You weren't prepared when your high-dollar speakers cried

"Think of me, think of me fondly when we've said goodbye," the one word you were trying to make me forget, but sitting here in these high-priced seats, I catch my breath while a stirring soprano sings to her phantom and I remember the rousing music of a different night, keeping the promise I made.

Nestling

Nestling

I found you in a home constructed by another,
twigs, leaves, grass from spring's first mowing,
ribbon from a child's heartbreaking balloon
situated in premeditated places, or flung
with frustration as time grew small,

But even in this perfectly realized space
you were vulnerable—alone, your heart
shone through skin like a rice-paper lamp,
tiny cries escaped from your open mouth,
eager to devour what I offered.

I wrapped you in my palms, a prayer,
felt your pulse quicken beneath my touch,
and then I understood my body's heat
can only resuscitate you, not keep you
here in my feathered nest.

Viviane

Viviane

According to Arthurian legend, The Lady of the Lake seduced Merlin who fell so deeply in love with her that he agreed to teach her all his mystical powers. She became so powerful that her skills surpassed even her teacher's and she imprisoned him in a tree trunk, a fate he foresaw from the beginning.

He envisioned himself
absorbed by her tree
secured by the trunk's
concentric rings, circles
echoed in the water
beneath her feet
as she rose to his lure,

hungry for his charms.
He craved the love
she would only yield
in exchange for his gift
of prophecy, his power
to clearly see what lay ahead,
to craft another man's fate,

yet he was powerless
to resist this nymph,
made her lover, scribe,
portal through which
his secrets passed
and bound him
on the other side.

Pyre

Pyre

You told me once you were going to paint a coffin,
brush it with bones and flames, like the lizard-skinned
race cars and motorcycles that speed away
from your garage, emblazoned with your name.

Asked me if I would place you in it, put you on display,
bury you in your own creation. So claustrophobic
I can't even be comforted by a down-coat on a cold day,
I agreed, only if you promised I would have no coffin at all.

Split the wood, prepare the pyre, shroud me in red,
lay me on a bed of oak, throw the first torch,
kindle the consuming fire, dance in my smoky haze,
wail your grief, then surrender my body to the blaze.

The Cinnamon Peeler's Wife

The Cinnamon Peeler's Wife

After Michael Ondaatje's "The Cinnamon Peeler"

I am the cinnamon
peeler's wife. Smell me.

Imbued with his seasoned hands,
my feet scatter a fragrant path
signaling his journey started here:

stripping silk stockings
from my thighs, nipping toes,
his spicy fingers floating

above my arched back,
perfuming my pillow
like Solomon's whore
whose scents coaxed
a boy to a lover's bed

like this one
where his palms
meet my blades,
seized my shoulders
with an intoxicating grip,

Then with one deft motion,
he took me, held me
like his *kokaththa's* handle,
marked me with a lingering scar.

To Remain Silent

To Remain Silent

would have been a better choice,
to resist the nectarine moon
and his eyes that urged me,
emboldened me to break
the silence hanging between us.

I thought saying the words—
attraction, chemistry, connection
was smarter than containing
so much polite desire,
ignoring audible inspiration

that passed between us,
deliberate steps away, back—
fearing the power of touch
would eclipse propriety.
Better to speak up, tell him—

tell myself I wanted only to clear
thick air, not stand beside him
in the rain closer than we had dared
before, fingertips touching, knowing
I can never take back these words.

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