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# Invisible Mink

Jessie L Janeshek  
[jjaneshe@utk.edu](mailto:jjaneshe@utk.edu)

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Jessie L Janeshek entitled "Invisible Mink." I have examined the final electronic copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in English.

Marilyn Kallet, Major Professor

We have read this dissertation and recommend its acceptance:

Arthur Smith, Ben Lee, Chris Holmlund

Accepted for the Council:

Dixie L. Thompson

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

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Ben Lee

Chris Holmlund

Accepted for the Council:

Carolyn R. Hodges  
Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

# INVISIBLE MINK

A Dissertation Presented for the  
Doctor of Philosophy  
Degree  
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Jessie L. Janeshek  
May 2010

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"This is the Twentieth Century, and We Get to New York on Time," *Rougarou* 2010. Web.

## ABSTRACT

Emily Dickinson, Frances Sargent Osgood, and Sarah Piatt render the nineteenth-century “women’s sphere” ironically *Unheimliche* while simultaneously conveying it as the “home sweet home” the sentimental tradition prescribes it should be. These American women poets turn the domestic milieu into, as Paula Bennett phrases it, “the gothic *mise en scene* par excellence...the displacements, doublings, and anxieties characterizing gothic experience are the direct consequence of domestic ideology’s impact on the lives and psyches of ordinary bourgeois women (121-122).”

Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath continue to represent the *Unheimliche* home in their poetry through the middle of the twentieth century, specifically by portraying the woman *writer’s* homebound experience as a fearful one; the materials of writing surrounding Plath’s and Sexton’s speakers encourage both creation and self-destruction. The speakers of *Invisible Mink* confront writing similarly in that the process of making a poem is couched in extreme anxiety. Poetic creation in my collection is explored via gothic conventions including the use of doubles, or poetic doppelgangers, as multiple speakers in poems.

Recent poetry and criticism by Lyn Hejinian, Brenda Hillman, Mary Ruefle, and Olena Kalaytiak Davis navigate the space between “home” and “away” in terms of tensions between the “feminine” and the “masculine” and the “confessional” and the “experimental.” Innovations in form and content throughout *Invisible Mink* are encouraged by Hillman’s work with blank space on the page and Hejinian’s writings on the materiality of words and forms. The use of classic film as a guiding motif in *Invisible Mink* is particularly inspired by Ruefle’s erasures and Davis’ “samplings,” as termed by critic Ira Sadoff, of classical literary texts.

*Invisible Mink* serves as an example of one woman artist’s “survival story” and is also, I hope, a testament to other women artists’ similar ordeals.

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## ***Invisible Mink: A Critical Introduction***

### **Affairs to Remember**

*Invisible Mink* is a manuscript about being a woman, being seen as woman, and seeing as a woman through poetry. It is about the music in poetry's words, spaces, and edges and what poetry does and can do for our minds. It is about creating poems—why to create, for whom to create, how and when to create.

The poems in this manuscript, all written during a period in my writing life when I was dealing with this idea of “giving myself permission to create,” and discovering how to do so, investigate this process through their content and/or form. *Invisible Mink*, in this sense, serves as an example of one woman artist's “survival story” and is also, I hope, a testament to other women artists' similar ordeals.

\*\*\*

I did not consider these poems to be “love poems” until it came to the time to write this introduction. But, I feel justified, now, in calling the *Mink* poems love poems, in that the manuscript is “about” my love affairs with words and with thinking.

In her essay “The Rejection of Closure,” Lyn Hejinian writes:

Language itself is never in a state of rest. Its syntax can be as complex as thought. *And the experience of using it, which includes the experience of understanding it, either as speech or as writing, is inevitably active—both intellectually and emotionally.* The progress of a line or sentence, or a series of lines or sentences, has spatial properties as well as temporal properties. The meaning of a word in its place derives both from the word's lateral reach, its contact with its neighbors in a statement, and from its reach through and out of the text into the outer world, the matrix of its contemporary and historical reference. *The very idea of reference is spatial: over here is word, over there is thing, at*

*which the word is shooting amiable love-arrows. Getting from the beginning to the end of a statement is a simple movement; following the connotative byways (on what Umberto Eco calls “inferential walks”) is complex or compound movement. (Emphases added) (50)*

I do not like the idea of a manifesto, or even an easily-articulated guiding principle for a collection of poetry. I am a true believer in Cleanth Brooks’ “heresy of paraphrase” and writing “about” poems—another poet’s or my own—usually feels like such heresy to me. That said, for the purpose of this introduction, some guiding principles are, of course, necessary, and Hejinian’s words above describe, in a more articulate manner than I could, how “words” function in my poetry.

I am not excited about writing in a straight line; I like every word to be both a signifier for the “thing” I have in mind and a starting point for what the reader wants the word to signify for himself or herself. *Invisible Mink* is about words making circles around what they should, could, and do mean, and these circles grow larger as readers enter and participate in my poems.

\*\*\*

“Why don’t you *think* in your poems?” Bill Knott asked me early in the first semester of my M.F.A. at Emerson. I had been writing throughout high school and college but had never taken a formal workshop. I did not really know what he meant by “thinking” in poems and, frankly, did not care. He said I had talent, an ear, and the ability to come up with memorable images, all of which were good enough for me at the time.

Four to five years later, working on the poems that would become this manuscript, I finally began to realize what it might mean to “think” in a poem, and I consciously began to try to do so in my work. The poems in section one of the

manuscript, which I introduce directly below, are the poems that begin to “think” about the themes of the collection as a whole as I have explained them above. The “thinking” about these themes are particularized and continued through the remaining five sections of the introduction, in which I consider the five additional sections of the manuscript and the themes and influences that were most crucial to the creation of those groups of poems.

### **Section 1: “Knock, knock, knock on your wall/and something will answer...”**

*Invisible Mink* opens with a little lyric, a pre-poem, if you will, “Alexis in Leather,” in which a cold, semi-naked woman is invited to “warm” herself by writing, invited, in a sense, to put on the “invisible mink” that is the conceptualization of the act of writing.

Or, at least, my act of writing. When I say “my act of writing” here, I mean, of course, the “process” of writing, not necessarily the resulting “product.” I am often disappointed in the “products” I create, and I know that a writing life means accepting many more failures than successes, at least where it comes to “good,” “finished,” “publishable” work. But I am rarely, if ever, disappointed by the process overall, though I may be disappointed with a particular moment or day; having the time and energy to sit down and attempt to make something with words, i.e. to put on the “invisible mink,” is always a blessing.

“Alexis in Leather” is important conceptually. I initiate each section of the manuscript with a small poem that I hope sets the tone and acquaints the reader with that

group of poems. This poem serves as the introduction to section one as well as the invocation to the entire collection.

The Alexis of “Alexis in Leather” is an extra-peripheral character (she only appears in one other poem, “Jezebel Has the Same Mole as Alexis. Hers Is Not Velvet”) in a section of the manuscript that, at least on one level, operates on the principles of periphery. In an interview with Stephen Ratiner, Charles Simic discusses how the poet’s subject finds him or her, rather than the poet finding his or her subject:

A lot of times, notebook entries over a period of time all circle some unspoken core. And then it takes a while to open up and see what you’ve really been after. I have a belief that things that come out of oneself at a given time are all related in some way. The poet is like a fortune-teller who looks into a cup of coffee, the grounds in the bottom of the cup, and sees images, sees through to what he’s after, what these things are about. So you discover your subject, your experience—rather than coming at the poem with these things already worked out....(82)

Though Simic is talking about how a cluster of notes may or may not come together to make a poem here, may or may not indicate to the poet what “[s]he’s after,” I’m applying his idea to the poems of my first section, in that they are the “peripheral” poems for both writer and reader. If this manuscript were spatial, arranged concentrically, if each section of the manuscript were literally “circl[ing] some unspoken core[s],” section one would be the outermost circle. Travel and spaciness pervade in section one, at least thematically and imagistically (and, in the case of “Vivisect the Creamy Sister” more literally.)

\*\*\*

*Mink*, as a whole, engages with the concepts of “home” and “away” in American women’s poetry from the nineteenth-century to the twenty-first century and is heavily

influenced by ironic and gothic renderings of the domestic milieu via poetry. The section one poems particularly ricochet between home and away in the sense that they travel, between Knoxville and Montreal, between inner life and outer life.

Traditionally speaking, the “domestic milieu” is, of course, the realm of the woman and has been and continues to be an important “place” in women’s poetry. The idea of the domestic milieu was sincerely articulated in nineteenth-century American literature, as critics such as Jane Tompkins and Anne Douglas have affirmed; a woman’s place, whether as wife, governess, or “spinster,” was at home, raising children, managing the household, etc. Yet, some women writers, namely Emily Dickinson and Sarah Piatt were simultaneously rendering the seemingly placid domestic milieu ironic and gothic adding an edge to what the nineteenth-century sentimental tradition, as examined in Shirley Samuels’ *The Culture of Sentiment*, prescribed it should be.

Poetry by Mary Coleridge, Christina Rossetti, and Emily Brontë, and novels by Brontë (*Wuthering Heights*), Charlotte Brontë (*Jane Eyre* and *Villette*) and Elizabeth Stoddard (*The Morgesons*), are among the works that have inspired me to target the “home” as the not-so-comfortable “place” where poetry originates in many of the poems included in *Invisible Mink*. However, Dickinson, Osgood, and Piatt have influenced me the most. Dickinson, Osgood, and Piatt viewed women’s life and concerns with a particularly acute sense of “feminine” intellect and emotion, while remaining within the tradition of women’s “domestic” writing established by female poets and fiction writers of past generations and maintained by their contemporaries.

Piatt and Dickinson use their somewhat exaggerated gothic sensibilities as a way to make the somber side of the domestic milieu ironic, while at the same time making a

true statement about what women could expect during their lifetimes. By portraying entrance and existence into the woman's domestic experience as fearful and anxiety-filled rather than pleasant, these women achieve in making the place that should be "home" the most unfamiliar or *Unheimliche* place possible. As Paula Bennett words it

bourgeois domestic space turns out to be the gothic *mise en scene* par excellence; and the displacements, doublings, and anxieties characterizing gothic experience are the direct consequence of domestic ideology's impact on the lives and psyches of ordinary bourgeois women (121-122).

In other words, by presenting the uncanny experiences of their personas, Piatt and Dickinson can be seen, in retrospect, to have represented the typically atypical domestic experience of a middle-to-upper-class woman in mid-to-late nineteenth century America.

Much of Piatt's oeuvre is devoted to "making the formation of middle-class women's subjectivity—or, put another way—the deconstruction of the Angel—her principal subject" (Bennett 139). The bulk of Piatt's poetry successfully renders the experiences of her female personas in the domestic milieu ironic; most relevant here is the poem "The Descent of the Angel," which directly addresses her task of deconstructing the Angel type—or the mid-nineteenth century notion of the domestic woman—often associated with *The Angel of the House*, published in 1854 by British poet Coventry Patmore (Piatt 95). In "The Descent," Piatt's speaker observes a newly married woman, advising her to sink to domestic life, or to forget "Romance and travel" and get used to the fact that her life will be filled with morbidity in that "earthly place"/Where life must be an earthly thing" and "her eyes [will awake] to earthly tears." At the same time, Piatt lightly gothicizes the figure of the descending angel/wife, envisioning the



bride as more ghostly than human, coming “out of the clouds...with satin sandals, fit alone/To glide in air....”

In many of her poems, Emily Dickinson situates the reader in the milieu of her middle to upper-class domestic female speakers by mentioning their “material” feminine accoutrements along with their “womanly” actions—sprinkling her work with “hats,” “shawls, (poem 443), “dimity,” (poem 401) “aprons,” “belts,” “bodices,” (poem 520) “sewing,” (poem 617) “mending,” “adjusting hair,” (poem 889) and serving “tea” (poem 1743)—and gives voice to these characters, as if she is examining the geography of their brains and reproducing what she sees directly on the page. Dickinson’s uses of dashes and capitals in these poems enable her reader to pause and emphasize along with the persona in question. When the reader follows the “scripts” Dickinson writes, he or she is taken directly into the lives of these women and may gasp and cringe alongside them. In poem 430, the anxiety of the female speaker is apparent. The speaker ends each line breathlessly, pausing so suddenly on the middle word of the last line that we can feel someone tightening the strings on her corset: “But where my moment of Brocade--/My—drop—of India.” The “drop,” emphasized by the gasps around it, functions doubly, meaning both a small bit and the sinking sensation of fear the speaker has after “...clutch[ing] at sounds—“ and “grop[ing] at shapes” earlier in the poem. Anxious domestic women personas are also especially well-represented in poem 443, in which Dickinson’s speaker focuses on details of clothing and domestic life in order to keep herself from going mad (“I tie my Hat—I crease my Shawl—...To hold [my] Senses—on”) and in poem 617, in which the speaker sews maniacally, assuring the reader that “I can make the zigzag stitches/Straight—when I am strong—.”

The domestic woman or “angel of the house” continues to be rendered ironic and gothic throughout the mid-twentieth century, most relevantly to *Invisible Mink*, in the poems of Anne Sexton, which succeed in depicting, among other subject matter, “confessions” of their speakers’ struggles to become “normal” women functioning in the culturally-defined roles of wife and mother. Through her technical skills as mistress of her craft, Sexton shapes such struggles into ground-breaking poetry. In “The Room of My Life,” Sexton creates a “haunted house” in the sense that the inanimate objects of the room in which the persona lives are “alive” and terrifyingly surreal:

the sofa, exhausted with the exertion of a whore,  
the phone  
two flowers taking root in its crotch,  
the doors  
opening and closing like sea clams. (422)

Sexton’s poem is especially significant to section one of *Invisible Mink* because the speaker’s fear stems not only from her presence in the room but also from the fact that the room is particularly a writing room or study, “the books, each a contestant in a beauty contest.” Being in the atmosphere where creation takes place makes the speaker feel as if she *should* be writing, but the prospect horrifies her; the instruments with which she practices her craft are terrifying, rather than inspiring, “the forty-eight keys of the typewriter/each an eyeball that is never shut...” as she attempts to placate her ferocious “desk” by “offering [it] puppy biscuits.”

The speakers of a number of the poems in *Invisible Mink* confront the prospect of writing in a means similar to Sexton’s in that the process of engaging with the page and creating something there is, itself, couched in extreme anxiety and even, in some instances, utter fear. In section one of the manuscript, the anxiety surrounding the writing

process is particularly expressed by the concept of “knocking”—the need to invoke a subject about which to write and/or the need for the speakers of these poems to “come” to their subjects are implicit in section one. The “knocking poems” in section one are the poems about “getting in” to the process of writing (for the writer) and about “getting in” to the experience of reading the manuscript (for the reader). The speakers of these poems are, for the most part, still “home,” still in the anxiety-provoking domestic milieu, and these poems are their stilted attempts to “start out,” to “travel” via creation.

The speaker of “Restless Palms” is still so far away from her subjects and her processes that she can only conceptualize what it means to write a poem through the metaphors she presents. Coming to the page is, to her, “ris[ing] every day/to skate on Veronica Lake,” or, in other words, a relatively surreal experience. The speaker can only scratch the surface of what her writing process is; in relation to the Simic quotation above, she is tracing figures on top of what her writing might be. The speaker of the poem “Knocking,” meanwhile, is “petrified,” weighed down with her “blank pages” and “unwritten poems”; a self-imprisoned prisoner in her dusty apartment trying to write, her only escape through “a dream landscape more true//to life than [her] mind.” Poems that fill the middle of section one, including “Love Means Never Have to Say You’re Sorry,” “Derry Queen. Venus in Furs.,” and “A Tale of Two Cities” echo between the real and surreal, the present and past, the imagined and the remembered.

“Nonplussed,” an imperative poem crafted in the second person, closes section one and attempts to encapsulate the overall aesthetic of this section and to serve as a “bridge” of sorts to the remainder of the manuscript. The character to whom this poem is spoken—a female stuck in a cold, rat-trap apartment, chronicling her exaggeratedly

anxious attempts to write, living in a non-world where the old movies she watches obsessively and the books she reads occasionally are more real to her than “real” life—identifies with the speakers and/or characters spoken to in most of my poems.

“Nonplussed” is also notable because it aids in investigating the frequent uses of classic film in my work primarily by narrating the “screening process” through which the speaker goes prior to “using” a film in a poem and serving as a foreshadowing of the poems of section three of the manuscript, which engage deeply with the watching/writing process. Film-watching is truly the highlight of the speakers’ “non-day” of trying to think and create; in the poem, the experience of screening a film concludes the character’s attempts—in terms of “Alexis in Leather”—to “write something warm.” Appropriately, the speaker of “Nonplussed” commands herself, in a mock ritualistic tone, to “Play your movie at six./Wear your invisible mink....”

It is also necessary for me to mention here that the speaker of “Nonplussed,” as is true of nearly all of the speakers in the manuscript, should not be taken completely “seriously.” Though the speakers confront thoughts and issues the woman writer faces, their *ways* of confrontation are what I like to call “playfully gothicized”; the speakers are deliberately obsessive and over-anxious, “petrified” in an amusing (to me, at least) way about whatever concerns they’re expressing in their poems.

Simic does something similar in poems such as “St. Thomas Aquinas” and “Shelley” when he consciously creates a speaker who is a caricature of a younger version of himself. As he explains in his interview with Ratiner:

[The period of my life in which these poems take place] is not a heroic period in my life—or interesting even! But then it became interesting *remembering* it. I saw myself as an absurd naïve character. It wasn’t even

me anymore...And those poems were wonderful to write because I could look at this character and describe him in that space without really feeling anything personal—except compassion. Like compassion for a character in a book. I just kept laughing....(81)

I, like Simic, consider my speakers to be “absurd naïve characters,” and, sometimes, to be caricatures of an earlier version of myself. I get a kick out of them. Until they start to multiply.

## **Section 2: “Different as light and day.”**

Would any reader of *Invisible Mink* be surprised to learn that, as a child, I read the *Sweet Valley Twins* series of YA books or that I was a fan of *The Patty Duke Show*, which I watched nightly in reruns on Nick at Nite? I even lifted lyrics from the show’s theme song (“cousins, identical cousins”...“different as night and day”) and retooled them slightly to make them the last lines of my poem “Jezebel 5(6)”: “Well, we never were twins/not even mechanical cousins//different as light and day.”

Twins, triplets, and multiple sisters have always fascinated me and have permeated the poems in this collection more often than not. My interest in twinning/sistering reverberates within the tradition of gothic literature by women from nineteenth-century poet Frances Sargent Osgood to mid-twentieth-century poet Sylvia Plath.

Osgood’s ability to move in and out of the consciousnesses of her various personas while making them ironic is evidenced by the fact that she often utilizes the eighteenth-century technique of speaking through the mask of either “the Belle” or the

“Coquette.” Osgood is extremely aware that, as she writes first-person poems, she is creating characters who are darkly funny parodies of “typical” women from her day. As Paula Bernat Bennett phrases it in *Poets in the Public Sphere*, “Osgood is among the first U.S. women poets to build a full-blown persona out of ironizing sentimentality” (35). This construction of ironic personas is especially evident in Osgood’s poems “Caprice” (Walker 124) and “The Statue to Pygmalion” (116). “Caprice”’s speaker is a desperate, breathless sentimental heroine, who urges her reader to “leave [her] love in peace/’Tis helpless woman’s right divine--/Her only right—caprice!” The speaker’s statements are often so dramatic and overwrought they are humorous, yet at the same time they convey an urgent and true political message: being capricious really *is* one of the only “rights” women have during the time period. Osgood takes a slightly different route in the short lyric “The Statue to Pygmalion,” giving voice to a female object who is usually only looked upon by men. The sarcastic bitterness of her persona is clear in the first three lines: “Gaze on! I thrill beneath thy gaze,/I drink thy spirit’s potent rays;/I tremble to each kiss they give...” Osgood’s use of the “Belle” and “Coquette” personas in her work is an instance of the twinning that was a hallmark of gothic literature by women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The desperate domestic female speaker of Plath’s “Lesbos,” meanwhile, communicates with a freer, happier doppelganger similar to those which exist in Osgood’s poetry. Situated in a “kitchen” that is literally a dramatic setting out of the theatre of the absurd, with “Coy paper strips for doors/Stage curtains a widow’s frizz,” the speaker of *Lesbos* addresses her “other half” who attempts to convince her to abandon her life at home (“You say I should drown the kittens. Their smell!/You say I should

drown my girl”) for a liberated existence outside the domestic sphere: “I should wear tiger pants, I should have an affair./We should meet in another life, we should meet in air...” (227-230).

Osgood’s and Plath’s methods of doubling contextualize and aid me in explaining what I attempt to do in creating poetic doppelgangers throughout *Invisible Mink*, who, in section two of the manuscript, are namely Jezebel and Lucy.

\*\*\*

My use of Jezebel as a poetic doppelganger in my poems began rather innocently. I am very interested in how “being” in a place influences my writing. In the fall of 2007, I visited Tucson, Arizona, for a ten-day writers’ residency at Casa Libre en Solana. While there, I wanted to consciously explore my theories about how physical place influences my writing process, so I decided to create a “desert speaker,” the only “voice” I would allow myself to use while writing poems in Tucson. I named this voice Jezebel. At the time, I thought of her as part Jessie (me); part Bette Davis’ character in the film of the same name; part Biblical character—I was delighted to learn, while researching her in Tucson, that the Hebrew translation of her name is “not exalted”; and part Shylock’s daughter Jessica in *The Merchant of Venice*, which I was rereading at the time.

Upon my return to Knoxville, I continued writing Jezebel poems, and Jezebel began to take on a life of her own, existing not just as a sole lyric voice, as she had in the desert poems, but often as an additional “character” in my work, another facet of “me” as speaker, someone with whom I could “think” within the space of a poem. Not unlike the two voices in Anne Bradstreet’s poem, “Dialogue between Body and Soul” or even the sisters Laura and Lizzie in Christina Rossetti’s *Goblin Market*, oftentimes, Jezebel is the

more “sensual” character, while “Jessie” is the more “intellectual,” or if you’d rather, Jezebel is “red” (fire/earth) while “Jessie” is “blue” (air/water). As I established in the previous section of this introduction, one way to read the manuscript is to ricochet between versions of “home” and “away.” If the speakers of section one’s poems are closer to me (Jessie Janeshek), the speakers of the subsequent sections are closer to other characters, Jezebel or Lucy, and farther from the relatively-realistic “I-Jessie.”

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The Lucy poems, most of which are included in section two, are influenced by the character Lucy Snowe in Charlotte Brontë’s novel *Villette*. Though I had written several Lucy poems prior to my week spent in Auvillar, France, as a student in Marilyn Kallet’s intensive “Reviving the Senses in Deep France” poetry workshop, it was in Auvillar that I realized how the Lucy poems could work within my dissertation manuscript. I was originally intrigued by Brontë’s Lucy Snowe because of the inherent contrasts of her character; her incredibly “cool” exterior self masks her madly passionate interior self, both of which are explored via the plot of Brontë’s novel as the seemingly-reserved Lucy learns to live as a teacher at a girls’ school in France, suppressing her unrequited love for Monsieur Paul, a professor at the school. In Auvillar, it occurred to me that Lucy could be my “French” alter ego, as Jezebel originated as my “desert voice”; I could use Lucy as a *porteau* through which I experienced French culture. “Post-*Villette* Part Deux” and “Lucy Snowe, Ordinary Day,” are direct results of this realization.

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Lucy and Jezebel both occasionally agonize over “their” efforts to write in my poems, providing me a means through which I think through the various aspects of my



creative process. “Lucy in Wien, Looking at Brueghel’s *Hunters in Snow*” was my attempt to write an ekphrastic poem based on a Brueghel painting, in part as a response to the Brueghel poems by William Carlos Williams, W. H. Auden, and John Berryman. Having tried, rather tediously, to write my Brueghel poem as a pure lyric created by “Jessie,” I decided to see if Lucy could experience the process more productively. Instead of studying the painting as a passive viewer, as do the speakers of the men’s poems who originally inspired my/Lucy’s Brueghel effort, Lucy asks “Where would I be in this painting?/Slippery woman, mossy hair...Baby sealed in a wine barrel” making herself an active participant, rather than distancing herself to write, as an observer, a pure lyric poem.

Lucy does not emerge from this poem without some residual frustration; she later laments in “Lucy to Erzebet, Watching *Conquest*” that she feels like she wasted too much time on the poem:

...I know I promised to take this poem easy  
make her last, half past four. I spent February  
on chicken boullion, writing around you  
and Brueghel. *Ice green chrome sky.*  
Do liquid diets strain your lyric voice pure?...

“Jezebel, Void of Course,” meanwhile, addresses another issue of my creative process, which I chose to explore via Jezebel’s voice, rather than through a voice closer to “me.” The poem asks the question of what a writer can “bring” from one writing session to the next:

Jezebel’s posture is bad.  
to put on her head  
crunch pages like chips  
crush a stick to her back?

No thick books  
wants to read voraciously

... Breed, breed a peach.  
Who owns "chianti"?

Jezebel bellied.  
Feels like a flake.

Poetry ages. She reusing cheese three years' old.

Jezebel's anxiety here results in part because she is contemplating reusing the word "chianti," a pivotal image in an earlier poem (not included in the manuscript) that she feels has been written by a "different" version of herself. She is using the "self"-dialogue of the newer poem to attempt to convince herself that the word "chianti" is not "finished" because she's used it once already. Her fear surrounding the reuse of the word is ridiculous and is exaggerated, playfully gothicized in the hope that the reader will also understand the "horrors" sometimes inherent in the moments of creation which, in retrospect, are not nearly as tragic as they initially seem to be.

The structure of "Jezebel, Void of Course" owes much to Brenda Hillman's work, primarily her books *Pieces of Air in the Epic*, *Loose Sugar*, and *Cascadia*. Hillman "aerates" many of her poems in order to recognize and privilege the function of blank space on the page as much as she recognizes and privileges the words on that page. One could say, of course, that poetry is always in part about the interplay of text and blank space, always a game of edges. Hillman's work intrigues me specifically because she not only concerns herself with how space works on the *margins* of her poems, as all poets could be said to do; instead, like e. e. cummings before her, she boldly lets space, or "air," surround individual words and phrase. In response to her work, I've written a number of my own aerated poems, some of which I've included in the manuscript.

The conundrum Jezebel faces in the poem also aligns itself with Hillman's theory of "ownership" in poetry, a decidedly feminist statement in direct opposition to the impulse of the male-driven "ego," the difference being that the speaker of "Jezebel, Void of Course" playfully renders Hillman's ideas gothic, in that Jezebel is overly and unnecessarily concerned about re-using words and subsequently exaggerates this concern humorously within the poem, while Hillman's concern is with the "re-use" of poetry in general:

...The ego is always worried about territoriality...the forms in experimental writing come from a lot of different sources. I would never want to say to somebody, "You stole my work," unless they took my words...But people don't own ways of writing, and so it seemed important to get...that notion into the world. There are original moments in art, as in everything. But nobody owns those. (Rosenthal)

The questions of ownership and the reuse of ideas become even more relevant as this introduction moves into its discussion of my poems that are influenced primarily by work that it could be said many others—actors, directors, screenwriters, producers—already "own": classic films.

### Section 3: “Fresh coat of lipstick./Victory Red, method acting.”

I began using themes from classic film in my work several years ago purely because of my interest in the medium. Because I love “old movies,” the time periods of the 1920s through the 1960s, and reading biographies of Hollywood actresses; the maxims, faces, lines, and imagery of Joan Crawford, Myrna Loy, Barbara Stanwyck, Bette Davis, Clark Gable, Frank Sinatra, Fred MacMurray, and others naturally migrated into my poems.

The bulk of my film poems started out as poem-a-day exercises, and many never made it past that stage. Watching classic films gave me reassurance as a writer, because the films themselves were so all-encompassing. A film from a previous era, even if poorly-written and/or poorly-acted was (and is) an object of interest to me. There is always *something* to be gleaned from the screening of a classic film, some image or some bit of contextual history. Classic films provided me with “ready-made” material in that, if I watched a movie, I had something interesting to write about the next day. I could start a poem by quoting lines, summarizing sub-plots, or describing the lightning-bolt shaped sequins on the shoulder of Carole Lombard’s dress.

In the film poems that have matured into something beyond a prettily-written summary of the movie in question, I employ classic film as a motif in several different ways. In *The Language of Inquiry*, Lyn Hejinian describes language as “a medium for experiencing experience.” Relishing this play on the concept of “medium,” my interpretation of Hejinian’s thought throughout poems including “Merrily” and “This Is the Twentieth Century and We Get to New York on Time” is that language is not quite

word or object but is “a space between” or, better, “a screen between” on which story, thought, and picture rapidly flash. In these poems, I “become” or “inhabit” the characters these actresses play on this “screen between,” sometimes scrambling dialogues and ambiences, reassembling these modernist-era ladies into contemporary personas.

My use of the films *Today We Live* and *Twentieth Century* in the poems “Merrily” and “This is the Twentieth Century...” respectively also correspond to Mary Ruefle’s use of text in *A Little White Shadow*. In this collection, Ruefle practices literal erasure, “whiting out” many of the words of an obscure 1899 prose text in order to create her poetry. In a process similar to that of Ruefle’s when constructing *A Little White Shadow*, I practice mental erasure with the text of a film. I begin these poems with the full “text” of a classic film in mind; that text is often materially present in the form of a detailed synopsis, a list of quotations from the script of the film, or my own mental reservoir of images. Approaching the “text” of a film as a “finished” piece, an “antique” of sorts, not unlike the nineteenth-century book upon which Ruefle embarks on *Shadow*, I begin to erase, mentally “whiting out” parts of the text not applicable to the projected aim of the poem.

In many of the film poems, aspects of the film—everything from plots to historical context—serve as a threshold or entrance, not unlike how Lucy Snowe functions as my *porteau* to French culture as explained in section 2 of this introduction. Aspects of a film surround and enhance the experiences and/or ideas the poem raises. I consider this process—this using film as a threshold—as something akin to “reverse method acting.” In theatre studies, method acting is, in brief, a technique that demands that artists unearth and rely on their personal experiences (physical, intellectual, and or

emotional) to create the characters they're portraying on stage or screen. "The method" was particularly popular in the 1950s as exhibited by the performances of Marlon Brando, Montgomery Clift, and James Dean. In film poems such as "Classic," and "Writing on Wednesday," I "reverse method act" by relying on aspects of films—including characters—to unearth and subsequently explore questions and beliefs about my writing processes that would not make their way to the surface without the bolstering of the films framing them.

The short lines and immediate structure of "Classic" attempt to capture the process of Warner Bros.' filmmaking, particularly the studio's production of pre-code movies. In the early 1930s, Hollywood was reeling from the Depression. The major studios—especially Warner's, always regarded as the grittiest, "working man"'s studio—relied on sensationalism, films that startled with sex, violence, and the exposition of "social ills." Warner's was known for ripping plots from the current headlines and transferring them to the screen, and the studio often hired former newsmen to pen scripts, which resulted in short, tight, plot-driven films. Appropriately, the films were churned out at an incredible pace; contracted actors such as James Cagney and Joan Blondell could make up to eight or ten films in one calendar year, compared to the one or two movies most contemporary actors make per year.

Many of these early-30s Warner films were box office failures and, as a result, either slid into obscurity or became cult favorites. On the other hand, many are indeed regarded as classic films, the achievements of which have yet to be surpassed in American filmmaking. The idea behind the poem "Classic" is that, presumably, no one involved in the production of these rapidly-churned-out films imagined that any of them

would remain influential and famous years later; instead they were focused on material, diurnal questions: “How fast can we get these movies out there?” and “How much can we make off of them?”

“Classic” parallels rapid, frequent film-making with rapid, frequent poem-writing, asking questions about composition and audience reception: “Is it the process or product that matters most?” “Why are the poems a writer thinks are memorable often the poems the reader does not look at twice?” “How do poems that seem insignificant to the writer—that the writer may have dashed off in a half hour—become ‘classic’ in her readers’ eyes?”

Like “Classic,” “Writing on Wednesday” is a poem in which thinking about an aspect of a film—in this case, a plot—corresponds to the poem-writing process. The speaker contemplates throwing herself off a “slow-moving train” à la Fred MacMurray in the 1944 film *Double Indemnity* in order to be temporarily bedridden so she has ample time to write and read during her recuperation, “librarians feeding [her] cake/each time [she] hobble[s] down to change Shakespeares.” It is not long until the speaker realizes the potentially negative side of this plan and explores it in a way that renders writer’s block playfully gothic:

*...But what if I make it to bed and I’m stumped  
past shiny ink, past a prayer*

*to my poetry gods on the cheap? Just me  
and a bic and a headache  
from too much Macbeth?*

I consider “Writing on Wednesday,” the penultimate poem in section three, a companion piece to “Jezebel Keeps the Appointment,” the last poem in this section, in

which the speaker is also exploring how the content of a film influences her writing process. The speaker here is, in fact, keeping the “appointment” of coming to her writing at the same time each day. When she is “scream[ed]” at by her poetic doppelganger to “Write it out *hard*” she responds by recounting a violent dream in which she “busted in a kid’s skull/left enough blood for an oath.” The poem ends with the speaker’s desperate desire to “...keep writing/*There’s no guarantee. There’s/no guarantee....*”

To maintain the movie-making metaphors present in this section, the violent environment of “Jezebel Keeps the Appointment” can be read as the “coming attractions,” a preview of the ambiance of the poems in section four of the manuscript.

#### **Section 4: “I liked her hair platinum until it got trashy...”**

With their focus on prostitutes, “lone vixen(s),” and violence (both physical and emotional), as well their employment of harsher imagery and language than the rest of the work in the collection, the poems in section four are the tough girls, the survivors, the refugees, the explorations of the dirtier side of a woman writer’s life. As the speakers in these poems fight to survive—which can be read metaphorically as the woman writer’s sometimes-hard fight to keep her art alive—they feel hurt, victimized. The demands of life beyond the page, made concrete here by the demands of the world on these speakers’ bodies, frustrate and anger the speakers.

If the reader considers the manuscript according to the concentric circle model I have proposed earlier in the introduction, this is the red center of *Invisible Mink*, the



bull's-eye, the hot inner core. Many of these poems are “exotic,” in the away-from-home sense, set in “hot” places, either the tropics or Perpignan, France, in dead summer.

Exotic locales have functioned as places of physical and metaphorical “heat” throughout nineteenth and twentieth-century poetry to the present day. Chronologically, my first inspirations for the hot “feel” of these poems were the Italy/volcano poems written by Emily Dickinson. Adrienne Rich takes the title of her 1975 essay “Vesuvius at Home: The Power of Emily Dickinson” from the final line of Dickinson’s poem 1705 (“Volcanoes be in Sicily...”). Rich herself, along with Anne Carson (*Autobiography of Red*) and Alicia Suskin Ostriker (*The Volcano Sequence*), has used the volcano as a metaphor for women’s creativity in her work.

Although Rich does not discuss poem 1705 in her Dickinson essay, she does touch upon two of Dickinson’s other “volcano poems” (as I have termed them), poem 1677 (“On my volcano grows the grass...”) and poem 601 (“A still—Volcano—Life—”), introducing the idea of the volcano as a metaphor for Dickinson’s restrained creativity, her “daemonic force,” which had “need of a mask...of innocuousness and of containment” (169-170).

Encouraged by Rich’s interest in the volcano poems, I’ve read the other poems involving volcano imagery in Dickinson’s body of work as well as a poem concerning Italy, the frequent locale of Dickinson’s volcanoes. In poem 80, the first poem Dickinson wrote in which Italy is recognized as a place of warmth and energy, the reader is not explicitly told what Italy means to the speaker, but he or she is able to deduce the meanings of the Italian life from how the speaker represents its opposite, the Swiss life. Here the “solemn Alps” function as a barrier, “a guard” between the “still...Cool” Swiss

life and the warm, sensual Italian life. It's only when "The Alps [momentarily] neglect their Curtains" that the speaker is able to get a moment's preview of life in Italy. As does Byron a generation before her ("Stanzas to the Po," "Stanzas Written on the Road between Florence and Pisa"), and as do Robert Browning ("Two in the Campagna") and Elizabeth Barrett Browning (*Aurora Leigh*) during her own generation, Dickinson sees Italy as an escape from her own life, which is both physically and mentally frozen stiff, the main difference being of course, the location of this cold life; the Romantics and the Brownings use Italy as an escape from the physical and mental "weather" of England, while Dickinson uses it as an escape from Massachusetts.

Records confirm that Dickinson definitely read Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* (Rich 161). Published in 1857, this long narrative poem chronicles a female poet's ascent into adulthood, and the character of Aurora spends a considerable amount of time discussing her paternity; she lives with her British father, a strict, analytical man, and mourns her deceased Italian mother, a fiery, free-spirited woman. The poems in which Dickinson considers Italian volcanoes explore a dichotomy similar to that of Browning's poem; Dickinson's Italy is passionate and feminized while her colder climates, such as the aforementioned Swiss Alps, are dispassionate and masculinized.

Like Browning and Dickinson, Rich, Carson, and Ostriker, I use the "hot" settings of the section four poems as a seat of feminine passion both physical and intellectual. I also continue my practice of "reverse method acting" via poetry, using aspects of classic films as tools through which I shape my poems. My "reverse method acting" is focused in this section by my use of the life and works of actress Joan Crawford, particularly her films *Rain*, *Flamingo Road*, and *Queen Bee*.

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The 1932 film *Rain*, based on W. S. Maugham's short story of the same name, stars Joan Crawford as an American prostitute who lives and works in the Pacific. *Rain* takes place in Pago Pago where Crawford's character, Sadie Thompson, is stranded while her boat is quarantined due to a malaria outbreak. Sadie stays at Joe Horn's general store and makeshift hotel, along with two husband-and-wife missionary duos, led by one of the husbands, Alfred Davidson (Walter Houston). Several poems in this section ("Island Girl," "J & J Radio: Island Girl Dialogue," "Island Girl 2," "Working Girl, Perpignan," and "Working Girl 2") engage with *Rain*, but "Island Girl 2" follows the film's plot most closely, re-presenting via words how Davidson tries throughout the film to convert Sadie, attempting to convince her to return to American and serve her time in prison. Toward the end of *Rain*, it seems as if Davidson has succeeded; as I describe it: "Sadie 2 is perlaceous, make-up-less, prostrate//slides the penitent in penitentiary...." Yet Sadie's erotic power overwhelms Davidson's religious verve; though the scene is not depicted on screen, the viewer assumes that Sadie and Davidson have sex while "voo-doo" drums are played by the "natives" outside (in my poem "Island Girl 2," "...through the dark beats of witch...Walter Houston convulses//slips off Sadie the Second's white nightie...).

As a result of this "trauma," Davidson commits suicide; his body is found washed up on shore the next morning. Sadie, meanwhile, emerges from her bedroom re-dressed in her full hooker regalia, body-hugging madras, fishnet stockings, white high heels, false eyelashes, and glorious dark red lipstick. By way of her "feminine wiles," by way of the earthy or the sensual, the woman has conquered here, or, perhaps, body has triumphed over soul. It is the prostitute who has the power—as well as the happy ending; Sadie

literally sails off into the sunrise with Sergeant “Handsome” O’Hara, her love interest from earlier in the film.

Sadie Thompson, like many of the characters Joan Crawford played on screen, had a life story not unlike the actress herself. Crawford’s “scrappiness” is legendary in the film world; she is known for overcoming sexual and physical abuse (she was raped by at least one of her mother’s many lovers and beaten with a broomstick by the matron of the private school where she attended and worked as a cleaning girl rather than paying tuition) to be a major success in Hollywood. The idea of the beautiful underdog coming up on top is what draws me, again and again, to *Rain*, to the other Crawford films I employ in section four, and to Crawford’s own life story. In a situation where a complete overhaul of patriarchal societal norms is impossible, there is, to me, an unconventional feminism in the prostitute (or, more broadly, the brash, trashy, tough girl) being able to control men (or, more broadly, the patriarchal world) via her manipulation of physical/sensual desires. Here, the prostitute/tough girl’s mannerisms, clothing, and actions are a bodily rendering of the siren’s song.

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Sharon Olds and Lucille Clifton—as well as Sexton and Rich before them—have taken the risks by writing about women’s bodies and sexual experiences that make the poems in section four possible. But, even more directly, these poems are influenced by the work of Kim Addonizio and Simone Muench.

Throughout her entire oeuvre of poetry, Addonizio writes unapologetically about female desire and sexuality and the ability of a woman to use these attributes of herself to gain power in a patriarchal society. ““What Women Want,”” from her collection *Tell Me*,

is particularly striking in this context. The “red dress” of Addonizio’s poem seems at first just a “garment,” and the speaker’s desire for it is nothing but her “want” to project a particular image of herself as she walks “down the street”:

I want it flimsy and cheap,  
I want it too tight...  
I want it sleeveless and backless,  
This dress, so no one has to guess  
what’s underneath...

As Addonizio’s poem continues, the image of the red dress deepens; by the end of the poem, the dress has taken on a life of its own as a representation, not only of the speaker’s physical identity but of the speaker’s power, as a woman, to create and destroy:

...When I find it, I’ll pull that garment  
from its hanger like I’m choosing a body  
to carry me into this world, through  
the birth-cries and the love-cries, too,  
and I’ll wear it like bones, like skin,  
it’ll be the goddamned  
dress they bury me in.

The voice of ““What Women Want””’s speaker is incredibly similar, with her brash, trashy tone, to the speakers in section four; the last seven lines of Addonizio’s poem particularly, quoted above, could have been spoken by Crawford’s Sadie Thompson in my Island Girl poems.

Simone Muench’s book *Orange Crush* also uses feminine clothing as a tool through which to examine and discuss feminine power, or, as Muench says, the book uses “clothing as an articulation of self.” The four sections of Muench’s collection are aptly entitled “Record,” “Rehearsal,” “Recast,” and “Redress” with the “Redress” of the final section of her book referring to both an ideological and a physical “redressing” of women

after they have completed the book-long transformation from, as Muench calls it, “victim to victor.”

The “Rehearsal” section of Muench’s book contains the “Orange Girl Suite” a series of fifteen poems that were originally inspired by the salesgirls/prostitutes who sold oranges outside of theatres in seventeenth-century England. Muench describes these poems, in part, as “an ongoing dialogue in her head with the archetype of the dead girl,” adding:

The orange girl, and the word “orange” (which, for me, connotes illumination), become a device, a type of familiar, in which to view the various binds that women find themselves in, even as the poems shift quickly from Elizabethan England “Which girl hath the merriest eye?” to the present, so that history is observed as a loop instead of a line.

Muench is a contemporary female poet who engages with classic film, another aspect of her writing which prompts me to read her work as a companion to my own. The orange girls, as Muench portrays them, are simultaneously inspired by female characters in 1940s film noir, including Phyllis Dietrichson, the character played by Barbara Stanwyck in *Double Indemnity*.

Muench’s “dead girls” relate particularly to my own “dead girls” Norma and Blanche, the female characters of the three playlets in section four (“Holiday, Cuba,” “Flaming June,” and “Sorry, Wrong Number”). Connected by Theo, Blanche’s husband and Norma’s lover, both women are silenced, rendered powerless, within the playlets. Norma literally loses her voice, while Blanche must take to her bed. A “cardiac neurotic” whose “trouble’s erotic,” Blanche is debilitated by patriarchal culture, literally a prisoner

in her own home struggling for some agency through her “control” of Charlie, the garden boy.

The poems in Muench’s *Orange Crush* progress, after the “Orange Girl Suite,” in a way that gives women agency; as Muench describes the third section of her book:

[The “Recast” poems] are about actual contemporary women, all living poets, whose language is gathered and re-considered and finally re-configured into homages, language portraits if you will, of women who through language, through the act of unsilencing in their decision to be writers, are re-inventing the “orange girl” so that she becomes, as the final poem in the orange girl sequence suggests, “Like riddles and diseases we are a multiplying sigh. . . blazing through doors of sugarwater and fire.”

I like to think I accomplish something similar via the last two poems in section four, “Love in a Fireproof Box (or Jezebel speaks to her Eva Avery self)” and “Jezebel, Out of the Nursery.” In these poems, the “dead girl” is resuscitated; by returning to life, she returns to the work on the page.

The speaker of “Love in a Fireproof Box” (who is “reverse method acting” with Eva Avery, the character played by Joan Crawford in the film *Queen Bee*) has driven Carole, her sister-in-law, to suicide. Granted, this is not a positive use of one’s power, but the poem does make the point that the female speaker *has* power, unlike Norma and Blanche, the speakers of earlier poems. Toward the end of “Love in a Fireproof Box” the speaker does redeem herself to an extent by her recognition of how hard it is for a woman to create in a patriarchal world:

Don’t you know how hard we have it  
culling our thoughts into poems

[Softly] Knowing when to let in?

Rendering herself vulnerable for a moment, she immediately changes tones, commanding that Carole's remains be "culled" so that she can create a poem in the young woman's memory: **"Collect all her fingernails!/Clone all her notes!"**

The speaker of "Jezebel, Out of the Nursery," meanwhile, has assumed complete agency. After the rollicking ride of section four, we see a woman writer, as speaker, in full control of her creative powers. This Jezebel is perfectly cogent, fully able and willing to use her poem to pose questions about poetic creation and the state of contemporary poetry. However, though the Jezebel in this final poem has regained her voice, she is not content with this fact. She capitalizes upon the red impulses of overt sexuality and violence pervading the section four poems, only she turns these impulses on herself, as writer. Like the speakers of earlier poems, she agonizes over reusing a word—this time, "throat"—and experiences nightmares related to her composition process, particularly her inability to finish a poem she has started about Jack the Ripper. Like the Joan Crawfords of section four, she feels objectified, victimized, but she is making herself her own victim:

She's not tired of poetry, she's tired of dark  
watching raccoons stuff her jack-the-ripper muck  
in their mouths. Overusing "throat"...

She's tired of pornography, breastmilk, and gingersnap  
always the culprit left clothed. She knows it's only  
a plastic moon of a daytrip at HoJo. She'll sun  
and she'll read, write a short poem in leaves  
round the Mexican flower, everything but the words  
she most needs to say.

*Jezebel dreams the sea is on fire!  
Someone's rolling  
gasoline balls down the falls!*



Jezebel's anger is not only directed toward herself as a writer; as the poem closes, she express frustration and/or violent thoughts toward mainstream poetic culture, toward what she sees as its reluctance, its fear to think too much, to "touch" the metaphysical via words, and to write using unique, exciting, sometimes obscure language:

... "Don't you like dance?"  
the rich lady asks, slips toward the pool  
lyric lyre scared to touch the water  
like it's crown jewels or a pre-mature baby. Jezebel laughs  
poems always end this way, poinsettias undead  
but near dying, vanity sizes no one will bless.  
"Yes, I'm an extremist."  
"Why didn't you say so?"

The speaker of this poem, though "out of the nursery," feels entrapped, and part of what is containing her is the unwillingness of many poets to "risk" crossing a line, to risk being "extremists" in their work, whether they are extreme in terms of language, form, and/or ideas.

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But, where, pray tell, is this nursery from which our Jezebel has emerged?

Dear reader, it's this way, below.

### **Section 5: "Nights without highlights..."**

I have been describing this manuscript in terms of distance (concentric circles rounding a bull's-eye, a ricocheting between the "home" and "away") and color (various dimensions and concentrations of "red" and "blue.") To situate the section five poems within this model, they are at least a circle removed from the bulls eye; they have cooled

somewhat, but they retain the memory of the violence of the “exotic” section four poems. The section five poems have returned “home” in this sense, but home is not happy. These poems deal with depression and rage, particularly the depression and rage the woman writer faces when she feels unable to create what she wants to create. These poems are the bruised, the black and blue of *Invisible Mink*.

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In her book, *Emily Dickinson's Gothic: Goblin with a Gage*, Daneen Wardrop likens Dickinson's poems, with their characteristic odd spacing, dashes, and capitalized words, to haunted houses built on the page with “windows and doors that gape at the reader” and “many liminal spaces...secret chambers and gambrels” (20-21). Wardrop's analogy works especially well when what Dickinson accomplishes through poems in which she makes the domestic or homebound woman her speaker is considered. Collectively speaking, the personas of these poems are terrified by the prospect of life in the domestic milieu; whether or not they are able to accomplish it, most of these speakers desire to escape their domestic lives or to, as Dickinson phrases it in poem 609, “Fl[ee] gasping from the House.”

The speakers of *Mink's* section five “live” in their own haunted houses, “gasping” within them, and desperate to “flee” them through their writings. It is important to note here, of course, that the speakers of *Mink's* section one poems were also at “home,” trying to create there, and anxious about doing so. But, in section one, the physical home itself was a place of comfort; the speakers' troubles there were all mental, literally “in their heads.”

The speakers of section five, meanwhile, are not soothed by their physical surroundings. “Home,” particularly the “haunted” nursery in which several of these poems take place, is something akin to a hall of mirrors reflecting the speakers’ mental states; the anxieties and uncertainties the speakers project are reflected back to them, and amplified, by their surroundings.

I have already mentioned Mary Ruefle’s book *A Little White Shadow* in terms of my film poems; the book has also been influential to the section five poems, primarily because the ambience Ruefle creates in it is strikingly similar to the “haunted” house and nursery the speakers of the section five poem inhabit. As are the poems of Dickinson and Piatt, Ruefle’s collection is set in the domestic milieu, and, dedicated “In memory of E.B.M. who died February 14, a.d. 1874,” it is, in part, a “gothic” response to a nineteenth-century death. Ruefle’s lines, which she has created by “erasing” the words around them in the original nineteenth-century text, are appropriately surreal and mysterious throughout her poem(s), as her speaker describes “seven centuries of sobbing gathered in the twilight,” “the piano filled with roses,” and “a servant who [seems] to be a lady in quaint de Medici costume, resting on soft red cushions partially covered with hands.” *Shadow*’s speaker even has a moment where she is literally “couched” in her domestic milieu, reflecting on her own thinking process

...Here I lie day after day and the only things  
I possess which can travel, can go no farther

think me lazy always idle; but my brain grows weary  
just thinking how to make thought very simply,  
“It’s always noon with me. Pale and deformed but very interesting...”

The speaker of Ruefle's poem here is "stuck" both physically and mentally, seemingly bedridden and unable, even, to "think" about "how to make thought very simply." The speaker of my poem "Mock Ghazaling in the Nursery" feels similarly. The poem is a "mock" ghazal because the speaker is unable or unwilling to expend the mental energy she would have to in order to make it a "real" ghazal. The only remnants of the ghazal form in the poem are the fact that it's written in couplets and that the speaker uses a proper name in the final line. In the ghazal form, of course, the proper name should be that of the poet who writes the poem; here the nameless poet instead addresses "Jezebel" indicating that she doesn't even feel worthy enough to name herself in her own poem.

The speaker's self-professed unworthiness emerges in a multitude of ways throughout the poem, in the italicized first "stream-of-consciousness" couplet ("*Night, paint, no new words in days...*") and in the fact that she sees her "art" merely as "marginalia." That her anxiety about her writing has manifested itself into a psychosomatic illness is evidenced by her need for "rest" once her father returns home and by the fact that when "Governess Mary" (loosely based on Ruefle, or at least the Ruefle I imagine created *A Little White Shadow*) tells the speaker that her "anxiety of influence [is] a sugar-dough axis around which/[her] teapot should spin" the speaker gets so "dizzy" thinking about poetic tradition and how her work does or doesn't fit in to that tradition that she becomes physically sick, "[her] vomit blending in with the half moons on [the] Persian carpet."

The psychosomatic problems of "Mock Ghazaling"'s speaker are shared by the voice of the next poem in section five, "When and If Jezebel Waxes Brunette." Here, as in numerous previous poems, the speaker is "sistering," attempting to employ similar

multiple speakers to convey the ideas with which the poem concerns itself. In earlier sistering poems, however, the sister speaking the poem had control of the situation and was able to “use” the other woman in the poem to her own advantage. Jessica, the speaker of “When and If Jezebel Waxes Brunette,” is a much less powerful speaker than the Jezebel of this poem; she is tired, weak, from her failed attempts to write her way out of the nursery, the haunted house. Rather than being able to herd together the women of this poem, Jessica documents the situation she observes helplessly, losing more and more confidence in her ability to write while the female characters in the poem, including herself, shatter upon themselves, multiplying into fragments of women, losing their power as the poem moves down the page. Like earlier speakers in *Mink*, Jessica has nightmares about her writing process:

...Clarinda makes light

of my processes, gossiping through  
her pellucid telephone. *Unregarded couplets*  
*seeped into my dreams, then thunderclaps*

*snapped me in half. I smelled smoke.*  
This poem would have satisfied once.  
Now I hate raw material

cannot roll burgers in balls. Heidi-ho  
helping Clara hobble uphill  
in her green smock on crutches

but I am Frau Nothing, Frau Frowsy,  
Frau Ink. Jezebel is Laura Petrie  
to my Sally or Pickles...

The poem ends on a claustrophobic note; although desperate, Jessica knows she cannot escape the haunted house in which she is trapped:

She's liable to leave, but I can't  
I'm too tempted by oxblood, the nursery chapel  
Jez's brown flip, silhouetted stained glass.

The image on which "When and If Jezebel Waxes Brunette" ends connects the poem to the physical setting of "Mock Ghazaling," where the speaker can't tell whether her father is coming home since she "can't see the streetcar//through the stained glass you've lacquered, cornflower/to navy...." It also relates the poem to the work of Olena Kalaytiak Davis. Many speakers in Davis' collections *And Her Soul Out of Nothing* and *Shattered Sonnets, Love Cards, and Other Off and Back Handed Importunities*, as well as in her chapbook *On the Kitchen Table from Which Everything Has Been Hastily Removed*, are consciously situated at "home," i.e. the domestic milieu. In her poem "the lais of lost days," Davis creates a speaker similar to the *Mink* nursery speakers, in that the speaker of "the lais" is trapped within her own poem, a hummingbird banging helplessly on the "window" of the poem in question.

Today I used my new little hummingbird of a poem to get a big old  
hummingbird of  
A bug out the only open, able window. All my poems are  
hummingbirds, are windows,  
are poems, mostly painted shut. Mostly suffocate and smile...  
Long so sweet! I said that in one of my latest poems. (One of my last.)  
I have finally got-  
Ten permission to repeat myself! (17)

The neurotic speaker of "the lais" also comments upon her own "reuse" of words, her tone and content here echoing the speakers of poems in *Invisible Mink* who have thought through similar conundrums in their poems.

Throughout most of the poems in section five, the time and space to create are dreaded and feared; the speakers are like Davis' hummingbird, and Virginia Woolf's oft-

heralded “room of one’s own” has been acquired by them but is not appreciated. The last two poems of the section, however, exhibit a shift in tone. The speaker of “Jezebel Has the Same Mole as Alexis. Hers is Not Velvet.” “*can’t leave*” her haunted house “yet,” but is content to stay there and try to write. “Hap, Hap,/happy to snap brittle time,” this Jezebel is not as terrified by time and space as are the speakers of poems earlier in section five.

The question “Why create?” has permeated these poems, and several speakers have banged their heads reluctantly upon this question, using the question itself to defeat their efforts rather than answering it and moving forward in their work. The title of the final poem of section five, “Why Jezebel Writes Saturday (She Could Be Sleeping)” signals to the reader that the speaker of this poem will indeed answer the question.

The speaker creates because of “the need” for a song, in this case a “sea shanty,” or more broadly and more philosophically, the need to make order out of chaos. The inherent irony (and humor, I hope) in this poem is that while thinking through her reasons *why* she creates, Jezebel realizes that she first needs a “something,” i.e. a reservoir of thoughts that she “owns,” from *which* to create. She needs her own chaos before she makes order. She needs her own “sea” before she writes her “shanty.”

I consider *Mink*’s section six my poetic embodiment of first making that sea and then singing its song.

## Section 6: “Our ship sails belauded...”

I concluded section two of this critical introduction by quoting from and contextualizing Brenda Hillman’s thoughts on what she calls the “re-use of poetry.” I return to this same interview between Hillman and Sarah Rosenthal, focusing here on a more particular instance of Hillman’s description of one of her own re-uses of poetry, in order to introduce my own re-use of literature as well as my (re-)use of Hillman’s poetics—and Lyn Hejinian’s—in my work. While discussing her collection *Cascadia*, Hillman specifically mentions the series of poems in that book which are set at a variety of California missions, which the poet visited while writing her poems:

For me, the big inspiration behind the Mission poems was George Herbert. I love "The Altar" and "Easter Wings," his shapey poems. I always thought those were so cool. And I thought, I want to write a girl version of that, with lace around it. (Rosenthal)

Delighted by Hillman’s notion of writing “girl version[s]” of poems by canonical male poets, I began to think of *Invisible Mink* in terms of this concept, and realized that, at least on one level, the poems of section six are a direct response to—or, better, my “girl versions” of—Wallace Stevens’ poem “The Idea of Order at Key West.” The excerpt from Stevens I quote here appropriately describes the speakers of the section six *Mink* poems, who not only attempt to make beauty out of their solitary experiences but also realize that it is their duty to first shape the experiences out of which they make beauty, or to first shape the contexts of their own poems by deciding what, from past writers and artists, they let into the realm from which their poems will be made:

...She was the single artificer of the world  
In which she sang. And when she sang, the sea,



Whatever self it had, became the self  
That was her song, for she was the maker. Then we,  
As we beheld her striding there alone,  
Knew that there never was a world for her  
Except the one she sang and, singing, made...

More than in the other five sections of the collection, I “make/sing a sea” and “sing/make a world from that sea” in these poems. The two main ingredients of the “sea” from which the section six are “shaped” are plots, the “plot” of the life of Mary Shelley and the writings that resulted from that life, particularly *Frankenstein*, and the plot—including the wretched theme song, “There’s Got to Be a Morning After”—of the 1972 film *The Poseidon Adventure*.

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Hillman conceptualizes writing as a feminized process, cyclical, rather than linear. The action of returning regularly to the page is just as important as what happens to the page when the poet returns:

There is a particular beauty about the regularity of the way that an artist works in relation to a day. If we are making art, we somehow keep on in a daily, drastic and joyful continuing... You get up in the morning, you let some energy get through you somehow, and you put the paint on the wall. That’s how it gets there. (Rosenthal)

Hillman’s emphasis on writing as a cyclical and regular process is particularly evident in her collection *Loose Sugar*, in which longer, often more “confessional” poems are interspersed with more “experimental” fragments during which Hillman reflects upon creation itself and the often mystical and/or trancelike states from which her poems emerge.

I began to write the Poseidon poems of section six during a period of time in which I was forcing myself, often unsuccessfully, to write every day, or when my process was, in Hillman's terms, a "daily" and "drastic" though not necessarily "joyful continuing." Many mornings I would awaken with feelings similar to those expressed by the more frustrated speakers in the *Mink* poems I have previously discussed. I dreaded writing, but I knew I had to make myself write or I would regret not using the free time I had to improve my work. To make light of the situation and to realize how I was overdramatizing my predicament, I started to sing *The Poseidon Adventure's* theme song to myself—one of the corniest pieces of music ever composed, in my opinion—as a sort of background tune to my "struggles."

In brief, *The Poseidon Adventure* is a 1972 "disaster" movie in which a tidal wave overturns an ocean liner and most passengers are killed. The remaining passengers incur a variety of mini-disasters onboard until they are rescued at the end of the film, to the sounds of the exaggeratedly-optimistic (considering the circumstances) theme song. My own "morning after," in this case, was the day following a previous frustrating effort to write, so this was akin to telling myself, after the tragedy of yesterday's experience, to "get back up on that horse" only (to me) funnier.

I was simultaneously reading Anne K. Mellor's *Mary Shelley: Her Life, Her Fiction, Her Monsters*. My interest in Shelley had been prompted by Ellen Moers' feminist reading of *Frankenstein* in her book *Literary Women*. Moers posits that *Frankenstein* is Shelley's means of responding creatively and productively to the many stillbirths and miscarriages she experienced from the age of sixteen onward. A woman writer describing her creations as her "babies" is a common metaphor, notably used very

early in American poetry by Anne Bradstreet in “The Author to Her Book” when Bradstreet’s speaker refers to her own poems as “Thou ill-form'd offspring of my feeble brain/Who after birth did'st by my side remain....”

What drew me to this metaphor in terms of Shelley was the graphic way in which I imagined the conflation of literal and creative “miscarriages” and “stillbirths,” or the fact that a woman writer who had literally suffered such atrocities in her “real” life and who had nightmares as a result wrote a book in which the motherless “creature” at its center is, itself, a nightmarish character. The imagine of Shelley’s nightmare “baby” as the writer/mother’s creation reverberated in my mind, most likely because I was frustrated by my own writing at the time; I felt like my own poetic “offspring” were partial births, disfigured, and, on days when I couldn’t start a poem, miscarriages.

Reading Mellor’s biography increased my interest in how Shelley’s life and work intertwined. I became particularly intrigued by Shelley’s relationships with her husband, Percy Bysshe Shelley, her sister Claire Clairmont, and the circle of Romantic writers with which the three of them were professionally and personally involved—as well as the texts these writers wrote and read. Always present in Mellor’s book was the fact that Mary Shelley was “overshadowed” by her husband Percy, in the sense that his work was dramatically more popular than hers during her lifetime and also in the sense that his “edits” to the first published edition of *Frankenstein* drastically altered many of Mary’s original images and ideas.

This was, to return to my conception of these poems as the “girl-version” of Stevens’ “The Idea of Order at Key West,” my forming of a specific context from which I would create—or my making of the “sea,” a rather particular “chaos.” I began to “sing

beside the sea,” or to order elements (“reverse method acting” with the plot and song of *The Poseidon Adventure* and the life and work of Mary Shelley) from these two contexts into semi-narrative poems. Mary Shelley, like Jezebel or Lucy, started to function as one of my “poetic doppelgangers,” interacting within the poems with a community of other women, both real (Mary’s step-sister Clair Clairmont) and imagined (my Jezebels, a Martha, a Margeaux, etc.), the most successful of which comprise section six of *Mink*.

Mary Shelley’s experience of being “read to” by Samuel Taylor Coleridge as a small child is well-documented and often recognized by her as a formative moment in her life. Coleridge, a friend of Shelley’s father, William Godwin, performed *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* in the Godwins’ living room. As a result, the section six poems are full of images—including the albatross and other sea birds, ghostly shipmates, and the ocean itself—that enable Coleridge’s work to help link the two seemingly unrelated elements of *The Poseidon Adventure* and Shelley’s life and works.

The Poseidon poems became more focused as I began to write them *to* Mary Shelley. In the context of *Invisible Mink*, these poems to Mary can be read as poems to all women writers who have had to circumvent aspects of patriarchal culture, or all women writers who live and write in the shadow of their own “Percy” whether “he” is one man, the literary canon, the academy, etc. The poems are to Mary about the woman writer’s recognition and celebration of her success, even when she feels as if her success is the result of reassembling the ugly parts of her life, or as Mary Shelley put it in terms of *Frankenstein* of writing her “hideous progeny.”

\*\*\*

Writing as a process in which a cyclical repetition induces progress, or a moving forward, is a key idea in the poetry and poetics of Lyn Hejinian as well as those of Brenda Hillman. According to Hillman's writing and thinking, as I've discussed above, the process of returning to page habitually is itself a stabilizing factor for the poet's craft; one could say that Hillman's "home" in writing is her knowledge that she will return to the familiar, the blank page, at the same time each day.

In Hejinian's work, meanwhile, the form of the poem is itself a "home"; predetermined—though certainly not traditional—forms provide the poet with a "safe," "familiar" starting point from which she embarks on her *unheimliche* experimental journeys. Hejinian's revolutionary book *My Life* can be classified, in one sense, as a "confessional" prose poem detailing a young writer's entrance into the word of words and things and her existence between and among these words and things. Paragraph structure—"meant to be mimetic of both a space and a time of thinking" (Hejinian 46)—and repeated phrases and images ("A pause, a rose, something on paper," "we who love to be astonished") are two of the "formal" means Hejinian uses to anchor her poem, or they are the "frames" for the text she builds.

Though the poems of Mink's section six are not officially "formal," their repetitions of images, sounds, and ideas enable them to construct and then expand their own form; they make the context for section six at the same time that they exist in that context, similar to ways in which Hejinian's repeated images and phrases simultaneously create and exist in the context of *My Life*.

The poems of section six "sing" more than earlier poems in *Invisible Mink* in the sense that the characters in the poems literally "make music" much more than other

characters in the collection. In “Poseidon Adventure, Plus Three,” Martha “hammer[s] the song of shipwreck/on her sealskin xylophone” and the women in this poem will “chant a palindrome” “when Shelley marries Mary; the female characters in “Poseidon Adventure, Plus Four” “Sing a song of nymphos/speckling the sky.” Several poems of section six are dependent on “call and response” structures, including “Theme Song” and “Another Morning After.”

The “singing” in the Poseidon poems is not limited to the images of music and songs contained therein. The pace of these poems is deliberately relaxed and song-like, especially compared to the fast and abruptly-paced poems of section five, such as “Mock Ghazaling in the Nursery” and “When and If Jezebel Waxes Brunette.” Though not written using regular meter, the majority of feet in the poems of section six are iambic, forcing the reader to slow down, “walk” and enjoy their melody, exhibited well in the last few lines of “Poseidon Adventure, Plus Three”:

...The physicality of passage  
haunts my contemplative nature.  
Soaking dishes makes me dangerous.  
I hold the filthy candle  
seven different ways to save it  
as if I had the choice to leave Poseidon.

Unlike multiple speakers in earlier poems, such as the women in “When and If Jezebel Waxes Brunette” whom Jessica attempted to unsuccessfully herd together, the female characters in section six co-exist in harmony. Though each pursues her own endeavor, she does so peacefully. The female characters sail off together, hopefully toward a better horizon of sorts, as the section concludes.

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During the spring of 2006, I took a workshop on writing a poetry series taught by Dennis Sampson. None of the poems I wrote in that class appear in this manuscript, but I do consider that class crucial, if not to *Invisible Mink* itself, to this critical introduction. One of the students, Gabby Kindell, brought up an aspect of my work about which I had never thought but about which I have thought many times since. On reading my poetry sequence, Gabby mentioned that she did not sense any sort of “release” in the individual poems or when the sequence, as a whole, ended. I believe she was talking about emotional “release,” and I was—and am—skeptical. I do not think poetry necessarily needs to provide a “release” of sorts, emotional or otherwise; too many contemporary poems seem, to me, to end on a world-weary “sigh” and to let the reader off too easily by not fully engaging his or her intellect. I remain an adherent to Dickinson’s thoughts on the subject when she describes the effects of poetry as difficult to articulate but certainly not “releasing”:

If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can ever warm me, I know *that* is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know *that* is poetry. These are the only ways I know it. Is there any other way?

I do, however, think that my poems—especially those in section six—provide a relaxation or unwinding of sorts in the sense that they lift their subject matter and buoy it up into song. I used a quotation by Hejinian near the beginning of this introduction to aid me in articulating how language functions in my work. Good feminist that I am, I come full circle, and rely on Hejinian’s words again to explain what, ideally, “formal” poetry—

form used broadly in the “order out of chaos” sense—does for reader and writer and what I hope the poems in *Invisible Mink* accomplish:

The relationship of form, or the “constructive principle,” to the materials of the work (to its themes, the conceptual mass, but also to the words themselves) is the initial problem for the “open text,” one that faces each writing anew. Can form make the primary chaos (the raw material, the unorganized impulse and information, the uncertainty, incompleteness, vastness) articulate without depriving it of its capacious vitality, its generative power? Can form go even further than that and actually generate that potency, opening uncertainty to curiosity, incompleteness to speculation, and turning vastness into plentitude? In my opinion, the answer is yes; that is, in fact, the function for form in art... (47)

Hejinian’s idea of form that “open[s] uncertainty to curiosity, incompleteness to speculation, and [turns] vastness into plentitude” is not unlike Keats’ description of “negative capability” “when [wo]man is capable of being in uncertainties” and, as I see it, not just capable of “being” in uncertainties but also capable of being comfortable there, being able to see the possibilities in the limbo between knowing and not knowing, being without direction but enjoying the moment within which one has the power to choose her direction.

I consider the Poseidon poems representative of such a “moment”; they are my envoy as well as my effort to re-integrate, to end the manuscript on a positive note while not losing the energy that has carried the writer (and, with any hope, the reader) through *Invisible Mink*. These poems do not disregard the anxieties that have pervaded the collection by any means, but they do attempt to reconfigure these anxieties in more positive ways and to leave the writer and reader with hope for a future both on and off the page—but especially on the page.



**FIN.**

1.

## Alexis in Leather

Your gams must be cold without fishnets  
muffless wrists needling  
under the weight of some catch  
tongues always longing  
to squeak up your leotard's side.  
You can't hear your bracelets  
jingling bait? Eat a piece.  
Write something warm.

## Restless Palms

Why this slow crawl  
through February?  
I listen to the flick  
of my cat's feather-light ears  
can't bear to think

*this might be my stride.*  
Imbalance and balance?  
Synonymous. The scale lady's  
arm muscles bulge  
above one glowing blue eye.

I bought 20 headbands  
at the underground Montreal drugstore  
never wore one. Three Lucies canoodle  
corner booth of my mind.  
Histrionically shaky

after two cups of coffee  
I live off sweetness and blight  
rise every day  
to skate on Veronica Lake.  
She's frankly lit

by a border of torches  
shaped like a small constellation.  
Hotdogs roast on her rotating blades  
smell astrological.  
You get used to her moods.

## Knocking

What of meeting days petrified,  
oppressed with swelled  
breasts, human pettiness,  
blank pages howling?

What of this apartment  
furry with dust  
like a hound-dog costume,  
and a dream landscape more true

to life than my mind?  
My college best friends  
skip across outdoor stages  
holding hands, counselors  
at a calamine fantasy camp  
the girls who bitched through England

while I brazed, invincible  
sitting in bookstores  
telling my notebook  
they plotted to slam  
my ruling planet  
against hardwood floors.

Will they see me  
in this window, skin  
wet as fungi, hair browning fern?  
Nightgowned phenomenon,  
heavy with unwritten poems?

## Love Means Never Having to Say You're Sorry

I bled from my breasts for a month  
attended my wake incognito  
on the arm of a Cincinnati mob-boss.

*How blonde Tony's date is!*

*Would she like a slice of stewed melon?*

Cradling the jackpot chunk  
envisioning my body  
spread on checkered cloth

instead of green olives  
I spat seeds in the small well  
of my cream Chinette plate

let the pink meat  
decompose in my throat  
sat at the piano sure they'd bust me.

No other woman plays *Clair de Lune*  
like the Charleston.  
Rossini for Tony  
*Linus and Lucy*  
a little out of tune...

*Some dimwit dug out  
the pimientos!*

---

Chanel heels sunk in mud.  
I shrunk while I smooched him goodbye.

He disappeared with his chauffeur.  
I went to the river, whipping my wig off.

---

My lungs cleared in July  
month made for uprooting lovers  
crabs, rubies, and gold  
waxing crescent, last of midnight

black kidskin shoes  
in a T-shape.

Lay snails on a dish.  
Will they trace his initials  
in raspberry gunk?

Month of laburnium...wait!  
They write *Quebec City*.

---

My Montreal cabbie  
wears a bone through his nose.  
His seats smell like Allspice and newsink.  
Purple dusk ruts for light

goes to bed hungry.  
*Eat a jar of Nutella.*  
*Skip the obituaries.*

---

Sun's melting crystal.  
I walk past a chapel  
look for a bird  
even brown rabbits  
Mary's face smoothed  
with cold Oil of Olay.  
God the cold!

Did she shake her head no?

My hand's turning blue.  
I'd have come sooner  
had I the money. Yes I'd have stood  
the mosquitoes, I love you!

Old woman walks past  
dragging her market cart  
canned milk, frozen lemons  
    gasps at the day moon  
    moan of the clock bells  
        asks *deja midi?*

*“Mountains in a dream mean you are struggling against  
some obstacle or challenge.”*

*--Witches' Datebook*

### **Derry Queen. Venus in Furs.**

Age comes fast in Aberdeen.  
Age comes fast for men wanted.

Dixie cup of ice cream on the shores of the Don and the Dee  
whiter city than Brighton.

Pollutia reminds me of Weirton  
so hard when everything's touching.

Roman tour guide, Vienna  
curly-haired waiter named Joe.

Half-caf espresso, kiss from Brazil  
an ice rink is just too damn honest.

Crystal's rolling on uppers again  
seeing her father (he died, she was small).

Chopped cod, a restaurant  
ping-pong genies in theatres

or what do foreign cities mean in dreams?

Smells like home, ocean  
I wade through the trash, feeling safe.

Paul never made it to Russia. Defrost. Gnosticcate.  
Don't write back either.



## Vivisect the Creamy Sister

The dragon painter lost his process  
once he found his princess  
post-exhibit

she drowned but resurrected

New poems sit colon-heavy on my chest  
soft apostrophes are burdens with the bullets in their heads

White time's interstitial, solid light through each second  
Black time is lifelike, sleep orthodox

Ovules spinning from the voxbox one option  
expansive—scratch—exclusive love

Redeem your seventh winter as the bride  
focus on the lightning that could have stretched behind your ears

thoughts beneath your skull      a crossbone-wide

## Tale of Three Cities

1. You spend underground days  
shuffling through tunnels  
desperate for jars of Nutella.  
Chocolately gloss  
chases backache pills down.

You surface nightly  
walk Vieux Montreal  
eating kebabs  
shove your nose in the needles  
of blue-lighted pine trees.

Men in tobaggans  
pocked by snowgrit  
kick you from payphones  
make you move South.

2. Lists, things to do  
saber-toothed cats  
the hope to get through—  
life-cycling Bogart  
and Bacall movie marathons  
barely dulls pain.

Climb the hanging stairs  
of your Frisco condo  
in sequined palazzos.

Serve your lover vodka  
from the geometric bar.

Face wrapped in bandages  
he smokes through a holder

glass straw leading  
to his beet juice-stained mouthhole.

*Would you like a smoke now?*

When he smooches you goodbye  
leaves sans a trenchcoat  
you'll blast the phonograph

Goddamit if he doesn't  
get arrested!

You stand guard at the TV  
make sure they tape  
your only light passage  
a call from the dealers  
checking on the car you don't drive.

## Nonplussed

Write five poems at once  
to cure writer's block.  
Curl in your quiet  
like it's a pod. Thank  
god for the woman and newborn  
next door. Commit them to sing  
if you need to feel sad.

You fret to finish *Villette*  
refuse to adieu Monsieur Paul  
won't read recent poems  
that make you remember  
someone outside's more exciting than you.

You and your cat are two peas.  
Tell him, "Mother's tweed suitcase  
is not for scratching.  
St. Bartholomew's church  
is chock-full of candles.  
My life's too eventless to memoir."

Play your movie at six.  
Wear your invisible mink.  
Host dinner at eight  
bread, cheese and liver again.  
Nonce words paw at the window  
your kitty's cufflinks ablaze.

2.

## **Lucy Fragment Interlude**

Lucy, I was positive

it was only an opium dream

all the phantasmic white dresses

flambeaux. Now I know it was true.

## Life's Work

Thirty-six days since Christmas  
doubting these dregs  
ever did nourish  
December a sardine  
sexless and dark.

Six vast yellow eyes  
hiss in the window  
eagle, moose, grizzly  
your skin so pink.

“Lucy Snowe, an *oie blanche*?”  
“Pa,” I sniff, “Hardly.”

Posed in prose  
fine minx of a Janus  
she doesn't mind hard work  
never forgets.

What news from France?

Ginevra in a marathon  
with *la bonne gentilhomme*?  
Coleridge's Geraldine  
*harmless as shadow*?

Dear Lucy, you light  
my paragraph fire, stitch cheer  
toward an end, and where  
can that leave me? Out back  
hacking up words.

## Beyond Self-Help

The hand that rocks the cradle  
rocks the concubine.  
Two Lucies kneel under the pine  
arms stretched in the posture of want.  
One must have dark to watch  
*Ninotchka*, sketch her ecriture  
nocturne on grey serge. Another needs  
barren trees, snowfall sans teeth.  
One loves bouncing fire. One doubts  
her cardinal will last until Friday.  
Both hate the fill, could come  
to love filling, come in  
where their starsister sits  
vicereine sipping her vichyssoise.



**Lucy in Wien, Looking at Brueghel's *Hunters in Snow***

Dogs taunt the hunt  
with their curlicued tails.  
Peer toward the haze. Is that the tip  
of a Romantic background castle?

Fated match of crack-the-whip  
a child drops to the seafoam-chrome ice  
stares up, concussed  
to the seafoam-chrome sky.

Where would I be in this painting?  
Slippery woman, mossy hair  
sliding under my cap?  
Baby sealed in a wine barrel  
instead of a cradle?

High on the battlements  
awaiting a sweet virgin singer?  
She'll choke on my  
deep-chocolate teacake  
treble clef scratching her throat.

**Post *Villette*, Part Deux**

Lucy cleans the stained glass with the whoreheart of a rabbit  
Lucy slaps the bald ass of the bleached-blond Swedish saint  
Lucy spritzes holier-than-thou parfum  
through his boudoir                      Lucy's pupils macaroon

Lucy grooms her feathers with untarnished tines of ice  
Lucy files her fingerclaws on Monsieur Fontanbleu  
Lucy plates her accidental fugue  
uncoiling like a snailshell sous la lune

## Jezebel, Void of Course

Four days beyond Twelfth Night  
world blanched as hay  
our moon rose the fattest  
she will all season  
Jezebel missed it  
will butt sideways  
of wifelight.

so cloudy  
now months  
crescent

Jezebel's posture is bad.  
to put on her head  
crunch pages like chips  
crush a stick to her back?

No thick books  
wants to read voraciously

Is it true in cold weather  
she resorts to writing on friendship?  
that true friendship strangles?

bitter spiced wreath?

Last night, ignored Hugo  
shower behind her.

who jumped in the leopard-skinned

Breed, breed a peach.  
Who owns "chianti"?

Jezebel bellied.  
Feels like a flake.

Poetry ages. She reusing cheese three years' old.

The moon moves away as you read this.  
soon 50 days to wreath earth.

Jezebel never paints nails  
prays at the threshold of sex

still shakes the polish  
once in a while, though.

## Prayer for Lucy, December 23<sup>rd</sup>

So what if today's not the day  
to re-enact *Diabolique* in my brain?  
I still eat plantains, contemplate moss doilies  
yammer on top of the hologrammed pool

light a candle for you, sweet Miss Lucy,  
treat it the February way. Little grimalkin  
I bless, let your grey down  
merry myrrh girl I sing

“murder is brisk, our souls chilly.”  
What I love about winter?  
No yule, just lily. Candied  
suites deck the memory glands.

## Lucy Snowe, Ordinary Day

She takes to drinking loosely in the afternoon, noix de cocoa soda blessed with scotch. Rotten lemon hanging off the glass like cocktail shrimp, she saunters up the hill to palm the slot machine, inhales violent coffee topped with chocolate by the spoonful, somersaults back down to learn her French, watches *Naughty Marietta* via satellite instead, knocks outside to hang the laundry, asks the rooster to her chambre for two rounds of roulette. Russian with the pampered goats from Roussillon.

## Lucy to Erzebet, Watching *Conquest*

Horses storm the parlor, latest in Russian décor.  
I know I promised to take this poem easy  
make her last, half past four. I spent February  
on chicken boullion, writing around you  
and Brueghel. *Ice green chrome sky.*  
Do liquid diets strain your lyric voice pure?  
Everything was a spectacle, or nothing was.

The train tracks my head, breaks at my right ear.  
The *do not disturb?* Yes, dear, it's for you.  
Mary's garden of eggs dangles off trees.  
Puffy EB's fluff the monogrammed bedsheets.  
Garbo overpins her brows to the stage  
Cossacks invading her décolletage. Charles  
Boyer's shoulders arch under his bullions.  
I'm petrified, per usual, to let my mind trot

even though you quote Hopkins, "*thursh's  
eggs look little low heavens and thrush,*"  
ask *what's the rush, chicki-poo?*  
Gabrielle paints a new desert each day in pastels  
can't read French, calls them lilypad Waterloos  
anyway. I need more Villon, but fuck guilt  
so much Ivory soap snowing in the proscenium.

## Eagle, Moose, Grizzly Revisited

No longer out back  
in bed with the axes  
counting out days  
the black beetle tinkled  
I need to watch  
spy Jezebel out of my love  
happy Peter Lorre  
knew how to burn  
Crystal wasn't so lucky  
babified  
make it stick"  
it becomes an addiction  
don't reheat my tea  
Europe's a crutch  
of this ruckus.

hacking up words  
salad so fresh  
where has the night gone?  
*Jekyll and Hyde*  
triangle of eye  
reared himself a gentleman  
the Corncracker ticket.  
but Icy was warm  
"a girl who could lie  
I do anything twice  
I mean it  
too thirsty to write  
please lift me out

3.



## **Jezebel Knows She Isn't This Great of an Actress**

How many times has she ended up crying  
prompted to craft easy rhymes  
how sweat can't be swept  
with two brooms?

“I couldn't tell you needed me.

I've spent the afternoon waiting to hang  
Virgin Maries off the living room bookcase.”  
Midnight, it still isn't done.

## Classic

Time to write a poem  
like a Warner Bros. film  
fast-flash, all process  
limbs of the body in check.  
Don't come to the poetry chair  
trussed up like Tom Powers  
on his last visit home.  
Reporters pick stories  
out of silk pockets  
chisel them into horsepills  
your crowd washes down  
with black gin. Speak easy  
thank talkies, thank Jack  
you're not stuck in the bowery  
chestnut shells twisted  
by immigrant children.  
Who says your Bogey  
poems aren't erotic  
the knock-outs, the unholy three  
Cagney, Edward G.  
already parodying characters  
2 years into the genre.  
Make it to the top  
you get modern architecture  
a chrome bar you can hide  
under the phonograph, a star  
in your gut from the gat.  
Joan Blondell slammed down toast  
ran to the bathroom  
came back in to another movie  
3 days per month off for cramps.

## Merrily

Everyone smoking. Handwritten notes. The need for a priest  
penetrates the ruined chapel.

Diana Boyce-Smith baking buns on the side  
scorching her throat with tea, rationed sugar

sandwiched between the blue-suited American  
and the chap who'll go blind

Daddy's old-fashioned windows illuminate study  
beautiful soup!

Please don't tell Diana

art-deco collars are anachronistic in 1916

don't exchange engagement rings  
with both brother and mate. Hyperventilate

conversations with "quite." Turn the clock to the wall  
and you'll have to come thrice. It'll be dark  
roses dying. Boys leave for the front

in five hours. Cross not a finger. Cross not a prayerbook  
Switch airplanes and boats. Rich. Neutral. Removed.

Don't all little girls crush on their fathers  
ride the violence of envy the way a man can't?

## Thrift

Velveteen reader, do you have a fever?  
Your velveteen writer does. Button-eyed saint  
called the plumber two lines too late  
but Niagara won't fall. In *Remember the Night*  
Barbara Stanwyck's not lethal. MacMurray  
will save her from jail. Plumber's clogged up  
with cancer, his St. Terese candle cost 99 cents.  
Babs pinched her bracelet off the velveteen plate  
not lethal, just hurting, loves Fred MacMurray  
like a clogged up tornado. Cancer's not  
always early, plumbers sometimes pop buttons.  
Niagara Falls glitters when lines disappoint.

## Jezebel, Jealous of Television

Jezebel says she's my necessary fiction  
thinks I watch too much,  
need to shift off the grey beach  
the haphazardly-parked '41 Lincoln  
happy platinum woman  
spinning with ice cream.

Springs coming in with her fever  
vomito. The clock's lost an hour  
hot molasses tastes like cotton.  
Baby Jane made body races  
in the wheelchair routine  
two nights before the beach.

This movie is what we must inhabit.  
Sisters know too much about one another.  
Three stanzas my limit, but I'm pushing through  
fresh coat of lipstick  
Victory Red, method acting  
not Gloria Swanson.

Even when she's angry, Jezebel  
can praise me. Grey's the only word  
I spell pretentiously. No colour,  
no flavour, I'm not big  
on labour. This will never  
be a sestina. Leisure's

my inspiration, Blanche is tied to her pulley  
her teeth will pop out when she dies.  
Jane sits in the lamplight  
quietly scanning  
her scrapbooks and I understand.

## The Appledoppeling Gang

It's staying light later. I'm in the mood  
to meditate Bette Davis, bookend the world  
with her *Stolen Life* twins. How can one work in

Pat and Kate Bosworth, the concept of want,  
the idea of root canals, the dream where my neighbor  
wears a Great Dane's head like a fucked-up Magritte?

Pat and Kate Bosworth want the same man.  
The waves rocking that Massachusetts light house  
uproot Mother Nature, beat her to a pulp.

Thirty days make a habit, and being an artist  
isn't so rare. Pat wears fur to a square dance  
courts Bill in her long evening skirt. Kate's portraits

are neat, Whistlerish. Her west-side gallery  
serves caviar. Karnock's a pig, but at least  
he takes risks. He'll paint either sister, dead or alive.

How did the wedding ring slip off Pat's finger?  
Kate wanted harder, pushed past Pat's right-to-  
left lunar. The dog-eat-dog neighbor pulsed smoke  
through her mask. Not enough moon? Add some gloss.

**“This Is the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, and We Get to New York on Time”**

Yesterday I met  
the medicine man  
his sunshine fruit tablets  
lit my hope like a fireball  
train windows stained glass  
by his vitamin light.  
He said my aura was green.

I hate east. At least riding west  
the new year comes over and over.  
John says we're actors.  
This Is All There Is.

*The chinchilla coat, Sadie  
yes, with real lace!*

Day 8, baked Alaska for supper.  
Would I a baby  
had I stayed Mildred Plotka?  
Would I a rascally nipple?  
Would I throw her to Dickens  
let her be raised  
by a jeweled foster grandma  
cut angels from silk?

Last night almost ate  
a full box of cookies  
tossed the rest out the window, Indianapolis.  
Should have saved them for gypsies  
not hoboes.

I was human once  
I read Lawrence.  
“Pale love lost in a snow of fear”  
I cheat now, getting paid  
to read scripts. It's cannibalistic  
telling the men their novels are lovely  
though he did write I was shapely  
with Saturn eyes.

“My little  
white Madonna,” John says  
“don't try to put it inside.”

*Nothing important.*

*The garland's in my name.*  
Though I ask how much steam  
one can burn mourning.



## Writing on Wednesday

Ever consider jumping off a slow-moving train?  
Fred MacMurray did it in *Double Indemnity*  
all part of his mistress plan.  
But, I'm thinking spontaneous, just for the ruckus.

You won't get hurt, might roll a little  
maybe need a crutch for a week.  
Perhaps you'll get fat, waiting in bed  
but think of the writing you'll do

librarians feeding you cake  
each time you hobble down to change Shakespeares.  
The girls upstairs will food-process your milkshakes  
lend you their diamonique bracelets.

I know it's tough finding trains these days.  
A braking subway might work, except for the rats.  
*But what if I make it to bed and I'm stumped  
past shiny ink, past a prayer*

*to my poetry gods on the cheap? Just me  
and a bic and a headache  
from too much Macbeth? You'll make a writers' block  
voodoo doll, stick-pin her brains*

stare out the window, driven snow, driven skin  
all your drivel within.  
Knock, knock, knock on your wall  
and something will answer. Something will waltz in

on her velvet paws, offer you choc-choc pelts  
ersatz verbs. Not quite poetry, no, yet a beauty.  
Take her candy, baby.  
Stranger things happen each day.

## Jezebel Keeps the Appointment

Write it out *hard*, you scream.  
Watching *Midnight Express*  
let me dream I busted in a kid's skull  
left enough blood for an oath.

The rest of the boys do light math  
remind me you have a bad heart  
someday you'll slip off, comatose  
leave me to calculate grace and want.

Last night, the cat pissed the bed.  
I washed so many times,  
couldn't get clean  
dictated a letter to Lady Macbeth.

You're not the weak one  
your braids sopapillas.  
You're not the cute little ruin.

The train does not stop here.  
What's worse? It's packed  
with people from high school.

I don't think they know me  
hepped up, not desperate.  
I won't earnestly pray  
or die for just anything.

You want to give, don't know  
how to give up. I want to keep writing  
*There's no guarantee. There's*  
*no guarantee.* This comforts me.

4.

## **Belle-Soeur**

The painted Mary sleeps beside the water demi-summers  
foie-grasing fuzzy ducklings  
in her heart-shaped gypsy trailer.

The Great Colonis burn the trunks of money  
should have kept the crepe suzette.

Of course we feminize the river  
curve her like the torso  
of Gina Lollabrigida  
call her brief soubrette

Our Lady Redlight Special  
in the sunrise sense.

## **Jezebel Interludes**

Jezebel tries to decide what sword she's avoiding  
tokes on the right side of the Garonne  
lone vixen who'd fancy spurring a Rome, still writes  
her teachers on die-cut butterflies  
begs every Toulousian to give a fuck about plagues.  
Don your *pest medicin*, meditate on the sunny  
Perpignan sons, who'd rather eat rats than be French.

## Island Girl

Personal disintegration, no underwear, heat.  
Played Old Maid all afternoon  
trying to decide what's for supper.

*You see how happy  
our natives are.  
Sundrum, seatree  
no need to scavenge.*

My Hawaii summer was hell.  
Bobbed from doctor to doctor  
more infections than a prostitute.

*Always that bit slipping  
out of the frame.*

\*

My man thinks I'm crazy.  
First time I fainted  
dropped right in his rucksack.  
Clock wouldn't move. 10:27.

*Why are you crying?*

I lied about the cards.  
That was Joan Crawford  
in *Rain*. Solitaire.

\*

*Last winter you fought  
to put words on the page.*

Lost. Took pictures.  
Proved snow to myself  
chemical tropics, the faucet.

*This life is conducive.  
Not our fault.*

What's happened to the studio days?  
Sprinklers pocking fake sand.

Rubber palms, Madras hanging...

*“Long before the stars were torn down...”*

Just look at the bathroom  
cats lapping blood clumps  
from the tiles.

*Please darken the bubbles with ink.  
Fill in the best advice  
you’ve ever gotten.*

Came to me slimy, color of jade.  
“Let nothingness into your shots.”

## **Working Girl, Perpignan**

Dijon mostaza drips off a weenie  
Ste Marie Plage

Jezebel's craving an angular haircut  
uncherished blonde. Trashy girlhood

she changed locks like Marnie  
screamed her way up from the trailer

Her royal blue bikini's

a universe center clasped bronze  
that sags on the wasting Christ's thighs.

Careful! His blood's only ketchup.



## J & J Radio: Island Girl Dialogue

“I think it’s a matter of being flighty  
landing in both my lives...”

Joan Crawford wore a 4C shoe  
Betty Boop statuettes  
white-patent in *Rain*  
still grand at the end-dawn

muck-stained black patches  
on the heels of her fishnets.

If I’d been born scrappy  
broomstick-bruised back  
indelible brows

arched sunrise, sunset  
you’d never know it.

~

Sadie descends on tamales in madras.  
Reformers talk her over  
like she isn’t home.

She’s right, though, huh?  
The worst is the brightness.

~

I’m here to buy a license  
to name a cat Pele

the Joan waiting roadside  
headscarfed  
hitching a ride  
back to her crater.

I’ve hung on doorframes  
looked ill without makeup  
prayed evenings away.

*You ever lost  
a library card?*

I've lived in a tent  
listening to phonographs

kissed the blonde cherub face  
day of my wedding in a lotus bog  
aisles and aisles of waste.

Think Lane Everett, the carnival  
girl in her 40s, Joan reborn softer  
not yet berserk.

Political bride  
house on Olympus  
the exotic life culminates  
in *Flamingo Road*.

Got away from it all  
by the sin of my teeth  
*damp hands puddling a 45*  
*under your mink.*

Thirty days in the clink  
and I'm back at my temple  
shriney and new.

## Working Girl 2

*The Riviera's more subtle? Pastels?*

Cooler than it has been. Not bad. Jezebel  
contemplates impossible launch

off the slab of lapis lazuli  
the catching herself

before her top half goes under.  
Salt does not mix with the stereotypical

Lux-soapéd blonde. The Toulousian jewelress  
wrapped the junk like a treasure

helped the man match his wife to a watch  
topped with a ribbon

cleavage dripping black and white dots.  
Jezebel pretends her mom was Joan Crawford

as Sadie Thompson, that they owned a rouge broom.  
She's not afraid of plastic bag sex

an Air France-striped bikini or grease  
all trussed up like a prop, Perpignan.

## Island Girl 2

*As the single candle and the flames off the hotplate  
glint certainly on the rainbars of cage...*

Sadie'd shove a pogo stick  
up her cunt if you'd pay her  
likes the sound of *lives*

but the wives slam the door in her face  
so quickly you'd think she had smallpox

Prison will evaporate at sunrise  
sand in her eye Max Factor tear  
creasing her cheek

No telephones on Pago Pago  
in her wake the equator

\*

Sadie 2 is perlaceous, make-up-less, prostrate  
slides the penitent in penitentiary

Joe Horn reads Ecclesiastes through the dark beats of witch  
but missing this part is not a slit throat

Walter Houston convulses  
slips off Sadie the Second's white nightie

\*

So prison evaporates

Sadie fastens her belt through its last handsome notch  
wings the fox stole back over her shoulders

**Holiday, Cuba**  
(*Theo and Norma*)

NORMA [to herself, playing *Reverie* on the piano]:  
*Sky's clouding up.*  
*Sustain, sustain.*

THEO [jolly, out loud]: Hold that note.

N: *Ruby-throat sunrise,*  
*could you be my time?*  
*I'm so tired every thing is a symbol.*

T: Very sorry for Avis, though I'm not sure what happened.

\*

N: *Cancer means lobster.*  
*Pisces means bite.*  
*Red spots on my legs.*

[out loud]: You know I'm so haunted  
by the sphinx in that book.  
Reminds me of a Tanning  
I saw in the Tate.  
Next time I came they'd put it away.

T: London's no good for you.  
That jack with the brushcut  
follows you over bridges.

N: When it's blindingly sunny, it's safe!  
And the shawl Avis wore  
how it faded—

T: Let's buy a houseboat  
in your precious Florida.

N: My first time in Miami  
room numbers were written  
above doorways in French.

I bought a bottle

of orange blossom cologne  
trapped flower inside it  
instead of a shark.

[to herself]: *Cinq, cinq, cinq.*

T: Why don't you practice  
ring your eyes in make-up  
let no sleep have its say?

N: You make women sick!  
First Blanche, now me.

\*

T: You've read Beckett, yes?  
He writes of sand.

N: Of course. *Happy Days*  
reminds me of Blanche.

T: My wife never reads.  
Gator for breakfast or mango?

N [blowing powder in his face]:  
Grapefruit and a ride on the beach.

T: In your negligee? May I join you?

\*

N [riding alone, still thinking of Avis]:  
How did she let it happen?  
How *did* she?

Does art slide back to sea noiselessly?

My mind disintegrates  
unweaves as we canter.  
It's over, I Appaloosen...

[The pony throws Norma who cracks like a coconut shell.]

\*

DOCTOR: I'm afraid it's a case  
of poetic laryngitis.

Check her maidenform daily,  
keep her out of the swamps.

N [scratchily, making fists]:  
I'll die in the Everglades  
before I learn to sign *I love you*.

T: Darling, you'll make a beautiful mime!

**Flaming June**

*(Blanche and Charlie)*

Watercress?

Yes. Pass the mayonnaise.

Charlie, I stroke my uterus orange.  
Thirteen of you garden  
kaleidoscopic outside

my beveled glass window.  
This is a metaphor.  
You are a snapdragon.

Yes, marigold.

You never told me you wrote.

I don't write  
I make songs  
while I ride the tractor.

Sing some. I'll hum.

My love is a sprinkler hose  
my love is a peasant-boy pose  
frying eggs for my love

and her husband's in Boise  
let's hope he blows  
his nose off in Ketchum...

Enough, prickly pear! I've got a tale.

Crunching shaved ice  
in Aix-on-Provence  
Theo pushing me  
in my wicker wheelchair

I watched a redhead  
dancing flamenco.



*I'm. Your. Teddybear.*  
[Gyrates like Elvis.]

I'm wearing a half-slip  
the colors of sunset  
tiered like her dress.  
Take off your clothes.

Not yet, petunia.

Who are you kidding?  
your dick is a cucumber.  
The locusts are clacking

like castanets.

Let's move to Reno  
my Venus flytrap.

Sure. We'll eat sand  
with platinum flatware.  
Newsflash, we need cash, babe. *His* cash.

[In Paul McCartney's "low" voice]  
*You never give me your money*  
*you only give me your funny—*

I'm dying in ivory under the lattice.  
Pastels don't flatter my skintone.

*Sitting in an English garden*  
*waiting for the sun...*

God, to mouthwash my brain,  
rinse the last thirty years!

*...and if the sun don't come*  
*you'll get a tan*  
*from standin' in the English rain...*

Charlie! My medicine, please.  
But first, taste this tea.

[Unbeknownst to Charlie  
Blanche has sweetened

the poppyseed brew

with lotus blossoms.

Once he collapses,  
she drops asleep in the heat.]

**Sorry, Wrong Number**  
(*Blanche*)

Hello, hello?  
Can you help me please?

I'm a cardiac neurotic.  
My trouble's erotic.

My daughter's in the Poconos  
drinking Merlot.

An admirer of Hemingway  
my husband's in Idaho.

I've no one to tell.

\*

A bride, I was fire

afraid my nipples  
would burn smoke holes

through my bodice's  
old-world embroidery,

zirconium strings  
ringing my knees,

my life *Lucia di Lammermoor*.

\*

Plan of attack? No plan.

No attack. The honeymoon  
rose, set all that.

Legs closed, I took to my bed  
faking seizures. The doctor said I couldn't

sustain making love, *please don't*

*touch her.*

\*

Every morning Charlie  
crumbles my morphine  
in orange juice

kneads my right shoulder  
to pulp. The first time  
he kissed my forehead

I turned my lips away.  
Next day he sat me on top of him

porcelain doll on a stick  
hula-girl Venus

rolling my hips.  
He reads the mail

from my husband,  
*fish are biting and horses*

*do love a brook*  
sniffs the musk in my armpits

bites my breasts violet  
sets me on the floor on all fours

bears down on me hissing  
*I hope your knees bleed bitch.*

## Jezebel 5(6)

Time lies suspended young pin-up

somewhere in France

a Grey Poupon-colored purse

waits, eighteen Euros

a man with a cart  
sells fruit slushes, no sugar

café au lait?

Well, Nescafé

\*

On the way to Nogales  
you ask about process  
my rat-chested cobbling

Thinking of Bishop's  
*wooden clogs*  
*carelessly clacking*

I feed you fibs as we switch  
to kilometers

*out here in the desert*  
*we call it maize*

\*

You're more interested in Europe than I am  
ecstatic that *Gigi's* revived

I've let my façade oxidate—  
but thank heaven  
for little girls—

(Remember, Jez, it's cliché  
to write about bodies  
might as well say

he spanked your thighs raw...)

So what if he did?  
It was diabolique!

Not big on dawn sex?

Well, we never were twins  
not even mechanical cousins

different as light and day

**Love in a Fireproof Box (or Jezebel speaks to her Eva Avery self)**

Well, that tender breast was impeccable.  
Two minutes too late.  
♪: “I think I’ll go for a walk outside. The summertime’s  
calling my name, can you hear it now?”

Canter in your jodhpurs, but don’t get too ambitious.  
I’ll practice collapsing my face in the mirror  
smear my effects in cold crème.  
Carole’s legs dangled from the loft in the stable.  
Couldn’t put anything past her.  
I liked her hair platinum until it got trashy.  
Little chit rationed my sleeping pills. Nuts in her blood.

When I dyed my hair red, our bed smelt of mud.  
Wonderful, dead old times!  
Carole used her own socks for a noose  
maniacally, edgewise.

[Phone rings.] Yes, sir. No sir. I miss your glow, sir. [Replaces the phone.]  
So sneaky she should have clanged!

Don’t you know how hard we have it  
culling our thoughts into poems?

[Softly] Knowing when to let in?

**Collect all her fingernail clippings!**  
**Clone all her notes!**

## Jezebel, Out of the Nursery

She's not tired of poetry, she's tired of dark  
watching raccoons stuff her jack-the-ripper muck  
in their mouths. Overusing "throat." She's had  
her meditative moments, waiting for rain  
unable to pollute her soul with food  
processing a beverage of lemons and poinsettia.  
(Blender looked like a vase until she turned it on.)

She's tired of pornography, breastmilk, and gingersnap  
always the culprit left clothed. She knows it's only  
a plastic moon of a daytrip at HoJo. She'll sun  
and she'll read, write a short poem in leaves  
round the Mexican flower, everything but the words  
she most needs to say.

*Jezebel dreams the sea is on fire!  
Someone's rolling  
gasoline balls down the falls!*

It's acceptable to be a bit afraid of power  
meet once a week to regroup. Form is home  
poemparts glittering inner tubes tan girls collect  
smoothly as hats. "Don't you like dance?"  
the rich lady asks, slips toward the pool  
lyric lyre scared to touch the water  
like it's crown jewels or a pre-mature baby. Jezebel laughs  
poems always end this way, poinsettias undead  
but near dying, vanity sizes no one will bless.

"Yes, I'm an extremist."  
"Why didn't you say so?"



5.

## Preamble

*Making a good shoe's just as hard as building an empire.*

Explains how Lily Powers  
worked her legs up that bank  
chilly blonde in pointy collars  
days the swanky music lied.

\*

Please give me seconds to be tender, Lonely Lola Lo

smell coconuts, smooch moonlight, climb stems of boys in khaki.  
I wanted to be magic  
back arching like a cat

cleaving toes and popped corns  
off the sobbing cobs.

This is why stiletto burn is worth it.

\*

Gentlemen at ease!  
Read Abelard and Eloise  
pearlescent guides  
to long-time loving.

I've learned I don't resent you.

I resent myself  
only flesh and water  
oxygen, some bone,  
shrieking ukulele,  
teary Deborah Kerr...

This is where the cash valise comes in.

Navy-blue lips whisper  
*life is pain* but  
Lola shuts them.



## Mock Ghazaling in the Nursery

*Night, paint, no new words in days. Automatic,  
autocratic, ox, orthodox. Villette, Violette. Lucy Elucidate...*

Governess Mary says my marginalia is art that gestates  
in red fringes of history. So heavy I sneeze. You clarinet

so loudly I'm dumb, strapping, no, slapping  
my bonnet-sense on, my fingers skinny calves

of a llama, my neurons neurotic. My fingers *not* necks  
of swans, your suggestion benign, too Lady of the Lakey.

You're always the hoarder, semi-sweet, brainy brunette,  
antipest. Mary squeezes purple jelly in my mouth from her breasts

illuminates her sketchbooks with green light and paint.  
Is Daddy home from Bucharest yet? I can't see the streetcar

through the stained glass you've lacquered, cornflower  
to navy. He promised canaries, Rossettis, and rest. I'll strip off

my costume, unbraid my zest, prance on your temples.  
Haven't had a new tunic since Mummycups died.

Mary says to be Dickinson, I must be myself  
anxiety of influence a sugar-dough axis around which

my teapot should spin. Indeed, it's treat force, my vomit  
blending in with the half-moons on your Persian carpet.

You know how to edit, asexual in the tunicate sense  
cementing my poems in your conch, Jezebel.

## When and If Jezebel Waxes Brunette

My blonde wanes, I'm not yet at the age  
my life can be seamless  
Spring's mellowed, big-mouthed.

Please congratulate me  
on my scholarship to dolldom  
a poem not at home in two columns.

I'm Jessica, hair one-oh-one. I've got brains  
invalided, I chop my sick mother  
two Clauds ununited

until they meet Pilate and crash  
one blonde and swiss-dotted, one  
brunette tropicalia who shakes her bouquet

splatters gold grease on the nursery walls.  
To continue these scenes, I need ambience  
illuminación. Clarinda makes light

of my processes, gossiping through  
her pellucid telephone. *Unregarded couplets*  
*seeped into my dreams, then thunderclaps*

*snapped me in half. I smelled smoke.*  
This poem would have satisfied once.  
Now I hate raw material

cannot roll burgers in balls. Heidi-ho  
helping Clara hobble uphill  
in her green smock on crutches

but I am Frau Nothing, Frau Frowsy,  
Frau Ink. Jezebel is Laura Petrie  
to my Sally or Pickles. Perhaps we should sleep

in twin beds? She's liable to leave, but I can't  
I'm too tempted by oxblood, the nursery chapel  
Jez's brown flip, silhouetted stained glass.

## Lucy Snowe Thinks *Dark Victory*, Cannot Commit Herself

Clunky phrases on a desk  
that doesn't feel like mine. Can't  
think of her name. Cloud-cover somewhere  
flushed baby wresting himself  
from his straps. *Judith Trahern*.  
Sandpaper your legs, ashen tulips  
effective. Judith who can't light  
a match. Geraldine Fitzgerald  
as Sweet Ann Assistant then the bitch  
who wouldn't give  
the Corncracker ticket. The public loves shimmer  
parties and glittery hats. Sometimes we forget  
the complexity of systems, how we fill time  
*but each one won part of the winnings!*  
the way a brain runs. The one time I tried  
to be flighty and sun, a boy threw  
a water-filled prophylactic at my ankle.

**Jezebel Has the Same Mole as Alexis. Hers Is Not Velvet.**

Bleaching hair at home leads to nights  
without highlights, life spluttering  
resting on eyeballs. I'm not threatened by ice  
what they used to call beauty marks.

Sweet pirate, retrace your steps. Say what  
you want me to say.

*I can't leave yet*

*I have not my skull, lack the skill to transform  
from peasant to courtesan, daubing on cordblood.*

I swallowed the lid  
to my liquor bottle, told all  
I'd swallowed the lock, hap, hap  
happy to snap brittle time.

**Why Jezebel Writes Saturday  
(She Could Be Sleeping)**

The need for a sea shanty  
venerating the Venus  
who washed up on the glacier

while she was out sailing  
with Gina Lollabrigida and  
Bette Davis, allaying the pleasure

she takes in fishing, a seal town  
bronchitis, eyewipes to swab  
Persian cat faces. Brachycephalic

the need for a gimmick.  
“This fog is so thick  
condensation made sausage,”

Bette says, clipped, though  
it would sound more authentic  
if Gina had said it. Jeepers  
creepers, the need for a sea...



6.

## **Jezebel Intermezzos**

Windy out there. Mary makes the monster.  
Mae West creates Mae West. W.C. Fields  
raises a strikingly high I.Q.  
for someone who habitually drinks embalming fluid.  
Jezebel does not lack intensity  
a city near Budapest  
knows she's left of aim when she shoots.  
"Better than commas," says Flower Belle Lee  
exploding the smoldering porcelain mallards.

“I’m finally ready for *The Long Night*  
prelude to a kill. Annie Dvorak, Vinnie Price  
sadistic magician. Gas mask, flower shoppe  
not unlike my own. You could put my  
two and two together...”

### **Poseidon Adventure, Plus One**

No surprise in this writer  
all night in the filling station  
ordering chili dogs  
ten-dollar mesh sandals with sage.

Descending the stairs in my Dutch negligee  
pretending I had sweet sleep  
I unwrap a new sketchbook. Jezebel shrieks.

Lachrymary Shelley’s in the parlor  
clucking up the pasteboard stage  
cloth-diapering the manger  
for her baby neverwas.

I waltz through the kitchen, plunging drains  
pestling dead pretzels to paprika.

A little sad, a little blue  
a little cervicitis  
but breasts sublime at seventeen  
and what albedo!

There’s got to be a pre-lapsarian elegance to eggs...

Mary named the baby Clara  
for the mother of Allegra  
Claire (née Jane) Clairmont  
who’d changed her name to be poetic  
after looking at her face  
dog-paddling on the surface of the lake.  
(Mark Twain called the lion of Lucerne  
the saddest piece of rock on earth.)

There's got to be a poignancy to these angeled eggs  
or maybe I'm just jealous, mourning after...

## Poseidon Adventure, Plus Two

I wake feeling so sane it's making me sick  
strut into the bedroom, miming "Dejection: An Ode"  
coddling too much my words, Jezebel says,  
swaddling each wretched oval in the gauze of the Oxford.

Mary's swabbing merthiolade on the neck of the faucet  
won't let me drink enough coffee, says she can  
brighten my nightmares to neon-maned ponies  
who'll swirl their legs peacefully in the Garonne.

I keep my legs crossed to uphold my bladder  
I've not popped out children, my future's still solid.  
Mary's is cracked, beet bleat stains on her bodice,  
looks like she's lactating terracotta. She has room to talk

what's her mistresspiece if not a yellow-eyed, thin-lipped  
black dream? I've broken a cherry in my hot tea  
to sweeten my read. Deep France was so French  
I can't translate. The rose city smelled like

a chapel of rest, bright on its surface, no undertone.  
Does a conscious framing of gothic take pressure off?  
I keep my belly big, rounding out poems, need  
that balance of context. Jezebel's fluent in French

says writing ironically's nothing short of a crime.  
Possibilities are limited, we're spinning in time  
sharpening our spinnerets, watching our fingers.  
My pale nails scream anemia, illegitimate kidneys,

Mary's left pinky indicates unforgiving.  
We played Ancient Mariner the whole way from Calais.

## For Mary, Miscarriage

Sacrilegious epiphany.      Pretty squash.  
    "Expecting" a temporary state

fetus Charles Laughton      treat him as such  
    milquetoast who will not drink skim

unless you're Elsa Lanchester      acting Louise Patterson

punchy hormones and *The Big Clock*      never stops ticking

perpetually pregnant or painting...what difference?

But a visit from Daddycups    sets you on track.    You root

    through the Wonderland dumpster    eat ovary pie

adore more and more  
the chamois of lies

Percy calls "romantic creation."      These days, invitro's

clear as the sky.

## Poseidon Adventure, Plus Three

It makes a difference when you educate abroad.  
Mary goes to Ladywitch's nursing school  
with Jezebel. I stay home, penning poems  
in the ecru parlor, rib bones  
dipped in ink. Martha is marigenous  
hammering the song of shipwreck  
on her sealskin xylophone.

Terms of marriageability? Dry hunger's one.  
The willingness to pray to rats  
who gnaw on marigolds another.  
The hydrolysis of lactose  
into glucose and galactose,  
a fingernail that whips  
our silky ways into the air.

When Shelley marries Mary  
we'll chant a palindrome  
know Candlemas is over,  
Mary lilies as maturative  
as the pussey lung infection  
I caught lapping up the Big Splash  
watching Shelley Winters  
balance on the fulcrum

of John Garfield's arm  
before he took her home  
and held her family hostage.  
The physicality of passage  
haunts my contemplative nature.  
Soaking dishes makes me dangerous.  
I hold the filthy candle  
seven different ways to save it  
as if I had the choice to leave Poseidon.

**Theme Song (a straight, light, and peppy poem)**

The shop by the seashore sells wicked seating  
Belladonna Reed skips her non-existent nap  
    buys the wrong chaise lounge      brownbags it with champagne  
    spills her shells and wedding rings      across the sawdust floor

Belles letters are too heavy      one more family calamity  
    lungs and pores

Myra the psychic says the baby isn't hers  
It's bugging her through dinner  
She won't let the whetting doll alone.

Mae West had an hourglass figure?  
Yes. Three-hundred-sixty degrees

Is Belladonna your warming-pan?  
Is Belladonna your albatross?  
Please tell her not to worry  
    even clairvoyants will get foggy

Are those the sands of time  
squeaking through her cervix?  
or the kittiwakes a-screaming?



## Letter to Mary from Jezebel

I've got a system, part weedy chin hairs  
part obligato. I'll live on this boat  
like it's a resort, write to buoy up  
the dry stretch. I'm stick-to-your-pistols  
productive. First mate shoves a gun  
in my back. He won't come to the wedding  
though he made a great show  
of logging your date. Absence of sun  
bone-in pity, teen pregnancy rates  
high on calm seas, can't hide in the cabin  
can't read through the storm. I'll lie  
on the deck, languish in custody  
of maritime laws, not yet to the state  
where I drink my own piss.  
First mate's gondolierish in stripes  
sounding my uterus by the point  
of his oar. Mornings, I still dream  
of London, tiger lilies encoffined  
on St. Paul's Cathedral.

## Poseidon Adventure, Plus Four

Our ship sails belauded  
to the leper island.  
Sing a song of nymphos  
speckling the sky.

Martha's longing for the inner life  
Mary claims is overrated.  
Creativity is labor.  
She paces, checks the clock.

When the candle's melting low  
its wick floats like her cervix.  
I want to walk beside the sea  
sing a song of nymphos  
(speckling the sky)  
but Jezebel's waxed futile  
streaked her hair brunette.

How many lines have I lost  
over ivory geraniums?  
Teresa Delgado lost her life  
about a bag of flour

spectrumed from hysterical  
to not afraid at all.  
My biggest fear is filling  
horizontal time. The cat

is a barometer, his long tail  
merits language. Should I  
hoard my eggs  
or share them with the colony?  
Might I contract leprosy  
rubbing Margeaux's castanets?

## Another Morning After

Call it counterintuitive

Kate Greenaway splitting a thin cigarette  
with Sydney Greenstreet  
Pete Lorre scratching sweepstakes tickets  
behind the ice machine

but there's something French in deprivation  
something crippled about sex.

A polioed uncle presses powder  
on the Prussian face of Madeleine  
the bellicose murderess in her antebellum dress.  
Since you wrote this, it will happen

but Jezebel must finish  
your Jack-the-Ripper poem  
if she is, indeed, our authoress.

Belladonna's fucking like a virgin  
burning through her innards, tuppance at the wharf.  
You thought you saw her  
pussycat? You thought you saw my island?  
You thought you saw the nightmares  
I shove down my throat?

Vultures ply my ulcers  
cold callers rock the boat  
switch back, and I'll be happy.

**Envoy (Post-Poseidon)**

Miracle is such a heady  
word like marigold

but can't prayer work  
if all we need

is to uncross one albatross

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## VITA

Jessie Janeshek is the co-editor of *Outscape: Writings on Fences and Frontiers* (KWG Press, 2008). She holds an M.F.A. in creative writing from Emerson College, Boston. Her poetry and reviews appear in publications including *Prairie Schooner*, *Washington Square*, *Passages North*, *Rougarou*, *Review Americana*, and *Caduceus*. She promotes her belief in the power of creative writing as community outreach by co-directing a variety of volunteer workshops in the Knoxville area. She is a freelance editor and also works as a writing instructor at UT.