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The Hair You Wished to Comb
by
Sarah Elizabeth Barch

A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

Oxford
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Approved by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is a collection of poems exploring gender and trauma in Greek mythology by retelling classical stories in a female voice.

INTRODUCTION

My journey towards writing about women in ancient Greek and Roman mythology started when I read *The Odyssey* and was introduced to the character of Penelope. I watched as she descended from her upper chamber, “wary and reserved,” drawn into the dining hall by a bard’s singing of her lost husband (1.379). Despite attempts to keep her composure, she burst into tears upon hearing her husband’s story and asked the bard to sing of something else. Her son Telemachus, however, rebuked her, saying, “... go back to your quarters. Tend to your own tasks, the distaff and the loom, and keep the women working hard as well. As for giving orders, men will see to that, but I most of all: I hold the reins of power in this house” (1.410-414). Penelope returned to her own room, and the reader is told that she “took to heart the clear good sense in what her son had said” (1.415-417). At this point in my reading, I paused and began to write notes in the margins of my book. Surely, I thought, Penelope functioned here as a man’s fantasy, an ideal woman created by Homer and ancient Greek society to champion Penelope as a paragon of loyalty, while simultaneously dismissing her as emotional and unfit to give orders. But, I thought, no actual woman would behave in this way.

I am sure that there is some truth to this, and countless scholars have analyzed the ways in which the *Odyssey* functions politically. But the more that I thought about this passage, the more I realized how many times in my life I’ve behaved exactly like Penelope, and how often I’ve watched other women do the same. I was raised in an extremely conservative and unusual Christian denomination with a whole host of problematic attitudes and cultish practices. Their ideas about gender and identity made me, and all of the women I grew up around, act just like

Penelope on many occasions. We attended camps, Bible classes, and ladies' days that taught us how to be proper women. While the men learned how to become leaders and preachers—how to analyze, interpret, and debate important issues— we were taught how to keep children quiet during a worship service, how to make crafts, arrange flowers, and dress modestly. Some of the church's members went so far as to state that a woman who had a job was living in sin. The most insidious part of the whole belief system, however, was the unstated yet ever-present conviction that women are, at their core, irrational, emotional, unable to make decisions, and not to be taken seriously. I've watched countless women remain faithful, quiet, submissive, fulfilling their assigned role and doing everything that was asked of them, thinking that this would earn them a kind of respect— only to watch them be dismissed, like Penelope, time and time again.

The title of this project comes from the story of Daphne and Apollo. Ovid says that Daphne, "wanting no part of any man... travelled the pathless groves, and had no care whatever for husband, love or marriage" (1. 479). When Apollo sees Daphne, he wishes to marry her. The reader is told, "He sees the long hair hanging down her neck/ Uncared for, says, "But what if it were combed?" (1.490). Apollo's desire to comb Daphne's hair is a symbolic refusal to take seriously the life that she has chosen for herself— an attempt to tame and groom her into something harmless and easily controlled. Daphne knew to run from Apollo almost as soon as he started speaking, but I have seen countless women— raised by a culture that celebrates men like Apollo— who don't even know when to run. Stories like Daphne's provide a defamiliarized landscape in which one can explore the effects that different attitudes and ideas about gender have on the people subjected to them. In Greek mythology, I've found the voices of women who, like myself, have a complicated and often troubled relationship with gender, identity, and trauma.

Writing in their voices has given me a mask through which I can explore the ways in which patriarchal ideas about gender have impacted my identity. Taking on the voices of women whose stories have been canonized for thousands of years— seeing how they faced the same kinds of problems that I did— afforded me a kind of boldness that I don't think I could have otherwise had.

I set out to re-examine the women in Greek mythology, to call attention to the parts of their stories that I felt male writers had glossed over. However, as I wrote, something unexpected happened. In her article entitled “Grand Unified Theory of Female Pain,” Leslie Jamison talks about the ways in which literature has found appeal in female suffering and the wounded woman, turning her into a kind of goddess, romanticizing her illness and suffering. In response to this, Jamison claims, modern female authors have taken the stance of being “post-wounded.” She states, “Post-wounded women know that postures of pain play into limited and outmoded conceptions of womanhood. Their hurt has a new native language spoken in several dialects: sarcastic, jaded, opaque; cool and clever. They guard against those moments when melodrama or self-pity might split their careful seams of intellect, expose the shame of self-absorption without self-awareness.” As I began to write in the voices of these wounded women from Greek mythology, I found myself feeling like it was somehow my duty to rescue them from being perceived as weak, beautiful, and romantic. I gave them cool, distant, rational voices. I had them respond to pain in the same ways I had responded to pain— by taking the stance of being “post-wounded.” I've seen the ways that such pandering can grant hollow but necessary power, and I think that such stances have been a part of women's struggle to be taken seriously since before Penelope tried to descend the staircase looking “wary and reserved” in the face of a room full of

men who felt that her response to pain was childish. But I did not want to make these women powerful simply by having them reaffirm the patriarchal structures that I wanted to critique. This project quickly became a battle with myself and the patriarchal ideas about gender that I didn't know still controlled my own writing. Throughout this collection, I tried to explore the mental damage that results from taking on a post-wounded voice—the pain and emotion that can be conveyed through stark, unembellished poems and elements of the absurd. I gravitated towards the prose poem, because this form seems to lend itself readily to the kind of authoritative, straightforward voice that I have adopted as a “post-wounded” woman. However, most of my prose poems include elements that are nonsensical, unrealistic, and unexpected. To me, this creates an interesting contrast that highlights the speaker's lack of agency. These poems would collapse without the confident voice of the speaker stringing the reader along into more and more absurdity. The fact that these women's lives devolve into chaos despite their best attempts at portraying themselves as rational and controlled underscores the ways in which pandering to patriarchal gender ideals can afford no real agency.

I also tried to push myself beyond the prose poem and the jaded voice that I am comfortable with. Growing up, verse poetry was one of the few emotional endeavors I afforded myself, because I saw that society took it seriously. To me, poems themselves are a testament to the fact that embellishment, openness, and beauty are things that humans have always craved. They function as a respite from the sometimes brutal starkness of our everyday language, with all of its limitations. I don't feel as if my verse poems communicate as effectively as my prose poems, but I wanted to attempt to use the verse form to capture the pain, anger, and desire of the women of Greek mythology.

As an art minor, I found myself excited by the possibilities that this project afforded for visual communication. I come from a long line of women who are incredible quilters and embroiderers— women who, like Penelope, were told that practicing fiber arts was the only becoming and proper way for a woman to express herself artistically. Throughout history, women have been encouraged to practice art forms that are seen as simply being “decorative” and therefore harmless. In the story of Philomela, the perceived harmlessness of fiber arts is actually what allowed her to covertly communicate to her sister that she was raped— her tongue was cut out by her rapist, so she made a weaving that portrayed the event. I wanted to incorporate fiber arts pieces into this project in order to challenge the still-prevalent idea that fiber arts are secondary to other, more established mediums.

In all of my artwork, I chose to use bold colors in order to challenge the stereotype that Western culture is synonymous with civilization and refinery. Renaissance and Neoclassical artists saw Greek statuary— with its cold, white, marble— as evidence that Western culture, from its cradle, was refined and restrained in a way that other cultures were not. However, chemical analysis of ancient Greek and Roman marble sculptures has recently revealed that originally, most of these pieces were painted in bright colors. I grew up viewing the Classics as being stuffy, canonical, and inaccessible. With this project, I hope to bring back some of the color to Greek mythology— to refused whitewashed, male-dominated ideas of what gender and society should look like. I refuse to accept Odysseus’ vision of Ithaca— founded as it is on murder and suppression, and I hope that this project, in giving a voice to the marginalized voices of history, can loosen the lasting grip of Odysseus’ ideas on Western culture today.



**the hair you wished
to comb**

sarah barch

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pandora

you are the first woman. you step out of your meteor into a subdivision of yellow houses and perfectly trimmed hedges. in your hands is a lacquered box that you are not supposed to open. a man waters his lawn. *welcome home*, he says, as if he has been waiting for you. he sets down his hose and walks inside. you follow. petals fall from your hair, sprouting meadows underfoot.

for years, you pack each other's suitcases and set out to learn every inch of your home together. you trace baseboards, vases, a carton of milk. once, in the dining room, on the candelabra, you decided that there would never again be anything as beautiful as this. he nodded, as if he could hear your thoughts.

you've memorized all the lines of your home together. you make breakfast by tracing toasters into the kitchen. you embrace in contours. this is just how he likes it. you, motionless on the bed beside him. everything in its right place.

one day, your lines start to move faster. they spread across the room in tangles. you search the whole house looking for what is happening, undoing years of teacups and perfectly folded pullovers. eventually, your lines all lead to the same place. they circle the box, caress its lock. you imagine spreading out in its warm insides. sometimes, there is a pool of milk. other times, there is a palace made of glass. one morning, you realize that you are no longer drawing a line to the box. you are standing and walking towards it. you do not stop. you run your hand over the wood. undo the silver latch. inside is nothing but a bird, a peppermint, and a revolver. the bird flies away.

a man in a gray suit knocks on the door and tells you that you must both leave. you weep together under the streetlights, sitting on your suitcases. you try to draw your lines into the parlor together, but they have all been cut. he blames you. the hose is wrapping around your house now, like an anaconda. the lawn becomes meadows. you try to explain to him, to make him understand. he draws a line on the ground to block out your sound. every night, he sleeps one streetlight further away from you. you grow miles apart, connected only by the dashes on the asphalt.

then, one night, he comes to you out of a fog. he takes your hand and leads you miles away, to a yellow house that looks just like your own. he says he knows what to do now. in his pocket is the revolver. he walks to the front door, and you follow. a man opens the door. your husband points the gun at his face. tells him to leave.

see, he says after you have unpacked. *we can start over now*. you nod. years later, sitting in a recliner, your hair in knots on the floor, you will think back to the meadow of flowers. you will picture yourself tracing blossom after blossom like an insect. thorax throbbing. your arms dripping with the nectar that you were too afraid to drink.

section I



leda

she didn't notice that all the animals had run away. or that the wind had started to escape through the pine trees in small tornadoes. she was outside, ironing her water lilies. letting the steam rise from their frog veins until they were smooth as skin. she pinned them to the clothesline, where they became for her: cheeks, eyes. pads of fingers. when he came up behind her, it would have seemed to anyone else that the world was very, very empty. but no one else could have seen the water lilies become, for her, a row of mouths. no one else could have seen their small, pointed teeth. no one else could have heard them all, together, scream.

europa

there are some things that only make sense in the daytime. I pack my suitcase full of paper and set off. I walk past rivers, snake heads, pools of grapes. my papers slip out of my suitcase as I walk, although I do not notice until it is time for bed, and I must sleep in the cold leather. I find an old woman living in a stack of tires. she fancies that she is going somewhere, although we are both moving too slowly to get any place worth going. yes, she says. I nod. I lay down beside her and flap my arms to keep from sinking into the dirt. my suitcase cannot keep up. it sinks deeper into the earth, where I know it will be reborn, the cow seed sprouting into mushrooms that will taste, I'm sure, like gumdrops, muscle, ammonia.

The Shapeshifter

When I wanted fear
I made myself thunder.

When I saw clouds
I became the rain.

When I was sick of guilt
I made myself the jury.

Do not run from me.
I can become the world.

europa 2

you send me gifts. guns, necklaces, a little soldier. how thoughtful of you, to know that now I am always afraid. during the day, the little soldier follows me everywhere, awaiting orders. at night, he sneaks around the village, opening everyone's windows just a crack, to let out some of their carbon monoxide. some people are grateful. others do not notice. a few threaten to shoot the little soldier if he keeps it up. but he has never had a reason to be afraid. one morning, I wake to an unlocked door, his room empty. I find him in the marketplace, lying face up with a hole in his head.

hera 1

when you came back home, there was a scar on your leg that looked like a mouth. *how'd that get there?* I asked. *oh, it's nothing*, you said. I didn't believe you. it was clearly something. it stretched from your ankle to your calf, and when I looked at it for too long, it barked at me. *let me bandage it up*, I said. *no, no, it's fine*. I said okay and made dinner. lobster and lemons, your favorite. you were very pleasant, more so than usual. but from under the tablecloth, I could hear sniffing. you tried to make conversation very loudly. you rearranged your legs. you reached down, slapped your calf, and it howled. *mosquito*, you said. I put down my fork and stared at the ceiling. *you know what*, I said. *I'm about sick of this*. *well, I am too*, you said, slamming your drink. a piece of bread fell to the ground. from under the table, I could hear the soft sound of chewing.

deinaira

you come back from your trip. in your hands is a plastic bag full of sand and pieces of shells. *for you*, you say, holding it out to me. sand falls steady from a hole in the bottom. I realize that you are trying to cover something up. I take the bag, dig through it. there is nothing but pieces. I decide to follow the trail of sand back to where you came from. I trace your steps through mountains, orchards, entire cities populated by ants. at the end of the trail I find a messy bed surrounded by candles and long, golden hair. I stand there for a long time. I stand there until all the birds have gone south. I stand there until the sand has swallowed me whole.

hera 2

I arrived at sunset to find that there was no one home. so I rearranged the flowers. dusted the plastic grapes in the cheese display. when your dinner had grown cold, I opened the window and looked for you. outside, there was nothing but clouds. I took out the vacuum cleaner, swept them all away. I found you down on earth, hiding behind a tree. next to you, a white cow. both of you looking up at me, wide-eyed. I don't know what you thought you were hiding. the whole earth knows that your desires take many forms. for once, as I looked down on the two of you, I felt very, very large. I felt, for once, that I had the power to do anything that I wanted. but I could think of nothing at all to do, except laugh.

Portrait of Deinaira

My body is falling apart. Usually, I can catch it before it gets too bad, but things get slippery in the shower. My eyes begin to sag. My shoulders melt. I admit, this is not ideal. My black hair shedding mountain ranges. To be frank, I don't know what is holding me together anymore. Pictures move when I look at them. Through the glass tiles, I become a lump of fruit that has grown overripe.

One morning, the grocer appears and places on my shoulder an orange sticker that says 50c. I am very distraught by this. I weep and weep until I am my own fruit salad. Then, the grocer comes back and raises my price to \$3.99. I have to admit, I am quite proud of myself. Now I spend my days in front of the mirror, rubbing my skin with honey, mint, cinnamon, saying— Deinaira, Deinaira, who would not want you? Licorice hair, watermelon nose. Come, watch me make myself beautiful again.

hera 3

at the grocery store, I peruse the aisle full of collapses. on one shelf are houses at various stages of falling into the ocean. on another, folding chairs. you sent me here because we ran out of milk, but looking around I realize that we have run out of much more than that. I go to the lady at the front desk. *can I help you?* she asks. *yes*, I say. *I am having a collapse.* she nods and hands me a paper sack. I take off all of my clothes and put them inside. *that'll come out to be \$6.82*, she says. *alright*, I say. *are you sure you want to go through with this?* she asks. *yes*, I say. she nods and hands me the money. I walk back to the aisle full of collapses. I find us on the third shelf from the bottom, wrapped in cellophane. our backs are turned to each other, and you are resting your face in your hands. you look ridiculous like this, sitting on your tiny throne. I feel good about my decision. maybe someone someday will search these aisles. rearrange our limbs. give the two of us a meaning that I can no longer see.

section II

philomela's weaving

at first, everyone thought it was madness:
her fingers framing hibernations.
orange peels, lampposts drooping
on the dusky boardwalk.
but when you took a step
closer, you could hear waterfalls. bulldozers.
the ocean. and over and over, a woman singing:
aletheia, aletheia, must you live alone?

nightingale

you invent
puppeteers
in your mouth
never here
undone songs
in your ears
broken walls
dry your tears

every year
pack me up
straw and tears
took my tongue
souvenirs
citizens
broken shears
morning's come

riflemen
disappear
you were late
calmed your fears
milkmaid calls
overhear
nightingale
no one's here

leda 2

every night, I shave my leg hairs and
wash them down the drain. I send them
to the alligator in the sewer, goddess of
entropy, and I hope it keeps her warm. for she
is like me, bald and smooth, a plucked chicken
waiting to be remade in someone else's feathers.

I watch my body in the mirror.
my eyes are fierce, holding
the entire night sky, planets—
nothing. but my cheeks
are still popsicles, my breasts,
doves. and I think—isn't it funny
how the mind adapts
but the body
at least mine
is a hard thing to deceive. I should like sometimes
to grow a fur coat. to run with wolves, to carry my children
far away from danger. but here I am, making myself
the way the world wants to see me: a flower, baby
smooth, waiting to be plucked.

selene

- I. the world begins, full of birthmarks.
- II. poison apples, swaying trees. pale rider
dripping mercury
- III. along the milky meadows. her chariot
reflecting icicles
- IV. her arms pockmarked with craters.
the moon fell in love
- V. with a picture book flipped too fast
- VI. (his skin drips off the bones)
- VII. selene, selene. where is your lover now?
- VIII. he sleeps inside
the home you could not fit in,
pregnant as you are with the world.
- IX. the world
is as it always has been.
- X. three black cats on a Tuesday
chasing something that was never there
- XI. misty falls the sunset plains
- XII. you walk alone.

aphrodite & anchises

I have circled your flocks for centuries
in the wild silk forests white to my bare feet
dripping pearls from my hair. *oh, hello*, I blush,
my sheep eyes parted. I tell you that I am some
lost princess in need of rescue (you would not like
what I really am) and you lead me to a room with blank
walls, a hair in the bathroom sink, and I find that I don't have to
pretend like this is my first time, my darling, my lamb. I grow bigger
and bigger until my head reaches the ceiling. you cry out in fear that I
am too large. as if you forgot, my darling, that I am the curve of the hill growing
meadows for your slumber. I am the wet rain dripping sap on your barren lands.
I am everywhere, in everything. and of that you should not have been afraid.

echo & narcissus

everything, reflected,
faces our desire.
but is this love—
my beauty, wet-boned,
seeking vultures?
you watch the gods &
the gods watch you.
vultures, seeking
bone-wet beauty.
my love,
this is but desire.
our faces,
reflecting everything.

aphrodite & adonis

we weep with you, Aphrodite,
our mother, our queen. we know,
too, that love is like this: a child in a box,
a garden of quick-growing things:
lettuce and barley and fennel,
sprouted in a scraping of broken
pottery. climb the ladder to the roof
of your home, place your gardens
next to the violent sun. watch
them wither. mourn loudly
over the death of our lovely adonis.

galatea

you rub my chicken skin raw
knead my breasts until
they are for you
limp balloons.
pull back the film,
reach your hand inside.

they say you gave me life,
that my stone arms for you
deflated. but what I've come
to realize after all these years
of blank stares, the silent dawns,
the empty carousels swaying
in our backyard
is that you liked me better
when I was nothing but stone.

section III



persephone

The mosquitoes were thirsty. I could tell because they started to follow me around as I watered the garden. Every time I bent over, I could hear them getting closer. But when I turned to look, they would hide. One could not deny they had manners. I watered the crocus, the asphodel, roses. Then I put the hose in my own mouth. I felt my insides growing, warm and red. I reached inside and pulled out a soft lump of fruit. I set it on the ground for the mosquitoes.

medusa

we did it because it was romantic: the marble dripping forsythia, her temple a mausoleum for our too-large bodies. we crashed, wave after wave, on this diadem: broken vases, floating sheets. it was all lovely, except for your sweating.

at first, I tried to act like I didn't notice. but it kept getting worse and worse, and then I started drowning. I saw a raft on the other side of the room, and I swam to it. I caught my breath, looked around. you were floating on your back, looking ominous. *what is it?* I asked. *this was a bad idea*, you said. *why?* I asked. *because she saw us*, you said. *oh. that's not good.* *no*, you said. *I'm afraid not.* *look— don't be mad, okay?* the water begins to swirl into a whirlpool. *why would I be mad?* I asked. *I had a great time*, you said. then you jumped into the whirlpool, and all the water evaporated.

it is dry now. too dry. my skin begins to crack into deserts. I itch and itch until clumps of face crumble in my hands. someone lifts the top off of the temple. a very large eye looks down at me, blinks. then, out of the desert of my face come the snakes.



laurel

I grow forked— a slingshot tethered
to the ground by an iron bar. I raise
my arms in a Y. this is part of the question—
at what am I aiming, who has made me
this way. at my crown I sprout everywhere
into tangles and tangles of lines. The hair
you wished to comb. if I could shoot something,
it would not be you. it would be the animals
gnawing at my feet.

actaeon

Ever since I saw Artemis bathing in the woods, things have been very different. I wake up each morning trapped in layers of thin nets that feel like pantyhose. If I start to panic, I won't be able to breathe. But if I keep calm, I can pick them off one by one. When they're all off, I'll go down for breakfast, and mother will look all frantic, and she'll tell me that there was just a beaver in the house. I'll pour myself a glass of orange juice and tell her, that's impossible, because there's no water around. But this just makes her more hysterical. Sometimes, the animal is an otter, a possum, and once, even, a koala. But mostly it's a beaver.

One morning, I wake up to her screaming about squirrels. There are no nets yet, so I grab a shotgun and decide to put this whole thing to rest. I think, at first, that my mother is crazy. That there have never been any animals. But then I start to hear them, too. Squirrels, squirrels, everywhere. They chew my toes. They're in my hair. I line up my shot. Shoot. The last thing I see is mother. Running towards me with a pile of nets.

niobe



athena

because I was not interested
in niceties. because they were
afraid of my snake eyes, leather
skin. because I would not become
a slave to someone else's
children. because I came from
the head of a man, bigger
than anything you could imagine—
the people, as we wove, said:
*mortals, being small, know
a thing or two more about being
a woman.* but a woman is
anything you can think of.
a woman is dirt and sky and
oranges. a woman is the moon
and a woman is a handshake
and a woman, too, can be spiders.

arachne

you thought to punish me
for being better than the gods.
what you (being a god)
could not know is that the world
was already doing that. the world was already
making me weave niceties for its smiling
morning parlors. the world was giving me
a palette only good for making circles,
carriages, pieces of fruit. now, I can carry
my children on my back. we divide like hair.
when the houses are asleep, we rearrange
the dust mites by size, shape, color.
by the time the houses wake up,
we will have already made several mosaics,
built towers and bridges and mausoleums,
climbed to the moon and jumped back down again.
we will have lived a thousand different lives, each
more beautiful than the last. and when the houses
wake up, we will go back to our corners and play
dead. watch the maids sweep our many, many worlds
into heaps of ash. and we will yawn.



section IV



helen 1

they say that I was forced to go.
truth is, I was bored. of shellfish
and brocades. of your unsightly devotion
and being called "fair." so I packed my bags.
met a strange man. we made love
under a stack of boxes. he told me of alligators
and air vents, eucalyptus and small packs
of sugar. when the men arrived,
I knew it was not for me
but for the women at home
sinking under the weight
of their sandy arms walking
always down rows and rows
of bassinets and all the while
dreaming of crocuses.

iphigenia

Father says that when the war is over we can go home and build our own castle. He says that if I wanted to I could build it by the ocean. I told him I would like that. We could race to the grottoes and throw rocks into the waves. I could show you the tide pools and we could name the starfish together, like mother and I used to do. We could have a pet lion and we could grow orchids and every morning you could sit on your throne while I walk around the gardens, picking you all the very best flowers. And I could place them in our funerary urns: the porcelain broken, spilling red ants.

clytemnestra

I took a train to the night show and on the way there, the world ended. I am not asking for sympathy. the sky dripped quicksilver. the crossing-guard took a vacation. these are all things I had seen before.

I walked to the theater. on the screen, a rabbit ate a snake. meadows grew, the horses in the sea drowned. in the distance, the sound of marching.

you told me once: in this world there are two types of people. but you were wrong. in this world, there is nothing but you and me.

helen 2

as a child I stood on a pier
clutching a pink sequined purse
looking out at what was the world
and was also nothing more
than two different shades of blue.
I wanted to drop my purse into the ocean
watch it drift past tentacles,
fish eyes, until it was buried among
the plastic, broken shells, soft mouths.
I wanted to say: yes, this is loss.
this is what it looks like.
but for me it was never so concrete.
there were no casualties.
no one missing. just day after day
spent staring at statues,
walking past hedges, while
all the while the birds
circled overhead.

Hecuba Leaves Troy

I am a pile of salt floating
through the ocean on the boat
of Odysseus (blue shudders under an
agave moon) who has set the world on fire:
the strawberry cans bursting ovens full
of tomatoes your chicken skin roasting
and if there was something worth doing,
I tell myself, I would have done it
climbed staircases of cigarettes
until I found the last oyster clamped in
tears and carried it down smokestack stairs
like it was my baby, my baby: I sing to you
in all your constellations and somewhere
over the sea you answer

andromache

over time I saw that there was nothing worth mourning but your lack of imagination. you were under no delusions. you saw the inevitable leaning of the nighttime spires and still, you walked into our city burning, our son thrown overboard, our love a pile of bricks. in my dreams, I imagine that you are like prometheus. we cheat them all: our bodies, a pile of fat and bones, charring while we dance together, somewhere underground. the dirt floor cool on our naked feet.

Homecoming

1. we are both on a checkerboard that fills the entire world.
2. on the one end, knives. on the other, a bathtub.
3. you are a red speck, a plague, ingesting the whole world
4. until you are enormous (*you are far away*).
5. already I can see you, perfumed, washing your skin, as if to say—
6. nothing happened (*the children are asleep on the floor*).
7. you are getting closer
8. (*you, whose footsteps to us are tapestries*).
9. I think you thought you could swallow me, too
10. (grape skins burst in my teeth)
11. but I am my own army now
12. and we have nothing at all to say except
13. welcome home.

section V



calypso

we sit in a bathtub full of fish and pass between us a box of Chinese takeout. the floor is made of pieces of paper, and every day at noon, the mailman comes and takes away one piece. when this happens you moan loudly, but otherwise you are in good spirits. I ask if the bath needs more salt, and you say yes. your tongue is a flounder and every time you speak I want to build us a sandcastle and make you its king. I tell you about our sandcastle, and how we could live there forever. you are quiet. the mailman comes, and you hand him a letter. the next day, he says that you can leave. I cry fish tears and offer you all of my pearls, but you wade into the ocean under a full moon. I realize later that the one who would hold your slippery soul must not need you.

sirens

stay your ship with us
and rest along the shore.
we can tell of things
you've never heard before.
ours are sturdy wings
we see the world unmoored
from the ether strings
that gods alone secure.
you look like a god
and we'd like to show you more
than the feather dust
that collects among your oars.
stay your ship with us
and rest along the shore.
and you'll know of things
no man has known before.

the shroud

I am half sick of shadows
and the suitor
dark and tall
watches my tender fingers
undo the shroud

I would let you be the death of me
tonight leave your rice in puddles
of oil blistering heat drape me
with the shroud
bury me anywhere you'd like
my body wet
with peppermints,
the smell of posies,
and your hands
around my throat

The Lotus Eaters

We came here from somewhere far over the waves
Now home is wherever the lotus we crave
Can anchor its tendrils in waters so still
Til blossoms so tender the mirrored lake fill

We row our boats eastward before the day breaks
Our home is a question mark swimming with snakes
We lost all our troubles, we pushed them with oars
We have to find lotuses floating near shore

What have we become in this rosy red dawn
We wander up mountains, we swim with the swans
We lost all our worries, we put them on clouds
Our home is wherever the lotus abounds

penelope's dream 1

in my dreams I have several children. I name them for the years, the stars, the dragons below ground. one has a birthmark shaped like paper. another has taken to walking in circles. I throw my children chicken nuggets, and they eat them like geese. they flock to me when I speak, like I am some great teacher. like I am more than the woman crying into her salad at the local deli. like I am the hero, me with my twenty children. every morning, I water my children, and they grow taller. and then, one day, like my years, they fly away. and I watch, as they are scooped into the jaws of the great eagle.

Homecoming

I find you in the kitchen, sweeping my years down the storm drain. That you wanted me to find you exactly like this is obvious. You are saying: *I have made everything clean*. I see children, a full moon, strands of hair bobbing gently down the darkened waters. And what was there to do but say: welcome home. I had forgotten that you were enormous.

Penelope Makes Dinner

home, I try to reach you over a sea of spiced nothings that you chew red with a full mouth like garden herbs are your daytime job. I watch your eyes sag from all of your beautiful failures and imagine that if this were my story, I'd be the night queen and I'd feed my children skiddish things while I swept the moon. you would be there, too, but you'd be much smaller than all of my children. and you would close your mouth and let my food crawl inside of you and wiggle around. your onion skin would crinkle as I tucked you away at night, out of reach of the cows' milk and the stove glowing red. maybe you would sing in my pantry like a fish in a ladle flopping soup, and maybe then your tomato mouth would smile. more like you to find the spice garden and make it cry garlic tears for your tender touch. make it lie leafy in the cold dew stripping green. you were the fine gripping of a death wish between two oars, and it suited you. now the refrigerator stinks of eggplants half-rotted, and I am the one who must crawl inside every night and sleep next to all of the other things that you wouldn't mind forgetting.

penelope's dream 2

in our bed I watch the curtains blue
in the sun and I am somewhere dark
and warm where you came back in time
to climb my stone heart through sheets
of clouds that smell of hand towels and
pine trees leading us somewhere green
where we will stop for one small moment
on our way to the other side
of an ocean full of swimming dreams.

we are beautiful in these sheets
and you are still looking
not for answers but a knock on the
window ivy tiptoes the berries drip
and you watch for cracks in the tile
like some checkered king who does
not yet know that all the squares
are the same. and I for now do not care
about the waking or the fog on
the airplane landing in a sea of
domino hopes crashing figure eight
landslides on these whipped cream
sheets growing wet because (for now)
stranger I am the queen of Ithaca
and you like a breaking wave wash me
with the seesaw dream that we know
nothing yet that might happen.

Odysseus

He sits on the floor in front of the television watching himself: now a cowboy, now a knight, now a sailor. Although his quest is over, he knows that somewhere something came undone. He watches all of the tapes despite being convinced that they will show him nothing. As he watches, his eyes become waves of static, and he sails. His beard grows longer. His wrinkles smooth. He does not see the bodies he climbed over on the way home, or the ones he threw overboard for fuel. He does not see the dotted line he held for twenty years like a mathematical certainty. He does not watch as the line becomes a tangled mess of bloody hair, still twitching, that he summits like a King. Instead, he watches: wet pebbles, shells dripping, silk skin, the lotus unfurls, entrails cooked, and he eats.

penelope

I cut your hair under the persimmon tree while the wind sends paper leaves skittering across the gravel and you are quiet, staring out into the rocks. your neck is cold, and as it starts to thunder I wonder if you've ever loved anyone at all. the clouds roll in from the east, looking like the beard of God. I think maybe he is someone you would like to meet, if only because you respect him in the same way that you respect yourself. the clouds are coming quicker, growing dark, smelling of ammonia. when the rain finally comes, your tiny hairs will stick to the chair, my hands, your cold neck. and you will not know that, had it been dry, I would have dusted them all away.

penelope's dream 3

I think we always lived here:
somewhere under the old guilt,
the cruel flagstones,
the struck match sketching
birthday candles year after year.
I've met a thousand men that look just like you;
none of them quite as soggy.
and in this was our love—
that under the leaf ridge shimmering
for seconds or for years
we put down our umbrellas.

section VI



The Helens

At any given time, there were exactly thirty-six women who could pass for Helen. Some of them dyed their hair black and draped crocodile skins over their shoulders. Others wore barrettes and dressed like milkmaids. When one of them grew tired of playing their part, they would swap. None of them, however, quite liked playing the real Helen. The main thing about her was that she somehow found a way to look like a statue and a very young girl at the same time. For weeks before the part, Helen would soak for hours in a tub full of lilacs. She would wake up every morning and paint her skin white. Practice parting her lips. When it was time, she would slip into the castle under the light of the moon, passing the old Helen with a nod. And she would settle into bed, dutifully, beside her husband. In the daytime, she would wander along the seashore with pearls in her hair, looking forlorn. Sip glasses of ice water while staring at hedges. When she was sick of all this, she would find someone else to take her spot. Then, she would slip out of the castle just like she had come, and into a pair of old sweatpants.

The Trojan War

The men started arriving on Monday, in white trucks filled with ladders and all sorts of instruments. They wandered around the neighborhood for a whole week, digging holes, running cables, taking off manhole covers. No one knew what they were doing. When we asked, they said that they were waiting. "For what?" we asked. "For the hero," they said. So we, too, began waiting for the hero. We looked for him at the meat market, on the swingset, under bathtubs. We dragged hero after hero to the men, but every time, they would just shake their heads and return to their instruments.

We started growing restless. We began to think that the hero was actually one of us. Neighbors installed security cameras pointed at each other's windows. The mailman delivered newspapers full of profiles of potential heroes. A reality television show was made. So you can understand our disappointment when the men packed up their instruments and left. The rumor was that they had found the hero, in a small town near the coast. The reporters were already there, poking around his high school, his grandparent's house, his favorite deli. He looked just like the rest of us, maybe with a bit more hair. When they said that it was time to go to war, we couldn't help but feel a little excited. The men with the instruments were there, nodding, as we marched away.

The Trojan Horse

We are going house shopping. I tell my husband, isn't this great. That we can finally have a place of our own. He says yes, but I can tell he is not as invested as I am. I say to him: you are not as invested as I am. He says that he is. He says, what about all of those days he spent tying ribbons for the announcements? Yes, yes, I know, I tell him. I remember about the announcements. And what about, he says, all of the hours he spent filling the animals with stuffing? I know, I say. I know about the animals and the stuffing. But, I say, it was never about that.

The realtor takes out her keys, shows us bay windows, pine floors. I tell my husband: I think I will buy it for you. He says ok. I jump up and down, kiss him on the cheek. I sign the papers. I make him move in all of the furniture while I go look in the attic. And there, just where I left them, lined up like toy soldiers, are all of my men. I pull up the ladder and let them make love to me, one by one, while my husband unbags the groceries.

The Odyssey

I decided that I would walk to the top of old Mount Olympus and give the gods a piece of my mind. I put on my best dress and packed a bag full of canned goods. They say that no mortal can complete the road to Mount Olympus. On the way up, they say, there are sinkholes, giant serpents, lakes of fire. And near the top, everything starts to change shape, grow bigger. If you aren't made of the same stuff the gods are, you'll expand until you pop, and then you'll become a part of the sky.

I didn't believe any of this, so I started walking. On the way there, all I saw was a boarded-up amusement park. It was full of spears, a ferris wheel, a carnival ride where you saw how long you could hold up the world. I walked on, through black pines and firs and lots of birds. Too many birds. I finally got out of the treeline and looked around. I could see the whole world, and I didn't like it. I started to feel as if I might float away. But there was definitely something on top of the mountain, I could see that. So I kept walking.

When I made it to the top, there was nothing there but a basketball goal and a doctor's office. I stared at the basketball goal for a long time. I couldn't make any sense of it, so I walked into the doctor's office.

"Do you have an appointment?" the lady asks.

"No," I say.

"Fill out this form."

I fill out the form and hand it back to her. Although I am the only one there, I wait a long time before someone calls my name.

I walk down a hall and into a room that looks like the entire world. On the wall is a clock made out of stars. A man in a suit sits at an ebony desk.

"Congratulations," he tells me. "You made it."

"Thanks," I say. "Who are you?"

"I'm Zeus," he says, and reaches out his hand.

"I don't understand," I say, keeping my hand by my side. He laughs.

"Didn't think it would be this easy?"

"No," I say. "What about all of the trials? Like all the snakes and stuff?"

"Oh, that. Yes. Did you not see any?"

"Snakes?" I ask. "No, none."

He writes something down. "Yes, we'll have to get that fixed," he says.

I look around. On the wall to my right is an entire museum. I can't tell if it's big or small. Above me is a map of constellations.

"So this is it?" I ask.

"Yes," he says. "Sorry to disappoint. Budget cuts, you know."

"But why is it a doctor's office?" I ask.

"It didn't used to be," he says. "There used to be these great big gates that were covered in gold, and there were guards there at all times."

"What happened to them?" I ask.

"Well, no one ever tried to come up here, so it was hard to convince the rest of the gods to keep paying for the guards."

"Are the rest of the gods still here?" I ask.

"Oh, no," he says. "They all moved away a while ago. Took everything with them when they left, even the gates. I think Hermes has them as the entrance to his cabana somewhere."

"Why'd they leave?" I ask.

"Oh, lots of reasons," he says. "Mostly, they were bored. We still keep in touch, though."

I'm quiet for some time. Zeus sips a cup of coffee and looks at me.

"I believe you had some questions," he says.

"Yes," I say. "I did. But they don't seem to matter now."

"I understand," he says. "I'll give you a minute."

I look around. In the museum are lots of women who look very scared.

"All of them," I say. "Those women."

"Yes?"

"Did you..."

"Did I rape them?" he asks. I nod.

"No," he says. "Not really. They made most of that up."

"But they were raped. And everyone was fine with it."

"Were they?" he asks.

"Yes," I say.

He nods, folds his hands. "It's a difficult question," he says, and pauses.

"Well?" I say.

"Did you see the basketball goal?" he asks.

“Yes,” I say. “What’s that all about?”

“I don’t completely know myself,” he says. “A group of men showed up, toting it up the mountain. I thought they were going to stop by the office, but they just sat it up and then walked back down. It’s curious, isn’t it?” he asks.

“Sure,” I say. “But you’re avoiding my question.”

“I know,” he says. “Look. Truth is, I don’t have an answer. Everything seemed okay back then. People just wanted to be connected to me, somehow.”

“Sure,” I say. “But don’t you care about justice? About truth?”

“Do you?”

“I mean—”

“Exactly,” he says. “Well.” He pushes away from his desk. “I’m really glad you could make it. Don’t tell too many people about this, alright? Or I may have to zap you,” he says. I look at him. He laughs. “Oh, I’m just kidding,” he says. “Until we meet again.” He nods and zips up a briefcase.

“Wait—” I say. But he is already disappearing, already gone. The office looks like a normal office now. Scuffed walnut, a rolling chair, thumbtacks. I walk out to the receptionist.

“Between you and me,” she says, “I wouldn’t try coming back. He’s not scheduled here again for centuries. It would be a waste of time.”

“Thanks,” I say, and walk out the door. I walk past the basketball goal, down the meadows, through the trees. Right when I get home, it starts to rain, to thunder. “Thanks,” I say, to no one at all.

The Amazons

When you came for me, you knew to come slowly. Had you made any sudden movements, I would have lashed at you with tiger teeth until you were nothing but ribbons. But you came slowly. Inching forward day after day until your hands were on my arms, your hands were in my hair. Your hands. When you pulled out your hands, they were empty. You left me a pile of pomegranate seeds for crushing in your white teeth. Sitting in the juices, I grew lobster claws and cut off my breasts. For you to cook like chickens, for you to throw dinner parties on. My body laying on a walnut table, the businessmen hold knives and forks. It has been like this since the beginning of time. You, the hunter. I, the fallow ground. How often have I been tilled, swept, tidied into a neat pile of dirt! Waiting for the wind to come and rearrange me into more favorable sentences. Waiting for the wind to carry my legless body out to sea. But my, how I have grown. You are old now. You sit in your subdivision all afternoon, chopping the heads off of the first pale grasses. And I have become the coyote mother living under your deck. Roaming in your backyard. Touch me and I will turn you into what you have been all along: soft bones, insidious question, blank stare pinning me, God, whatever you desire into your own terms. Looking now at the sky, the ground, the earth that does not want you.

Glossary of Characters

pandora: In his epic poem *Works and Days*, Hesiod imagines that the first woman was created as a punishment to mankind. She was sent to the mortal Epimetheus carrying a jar full of evils, which she opened, releasing death and sorrow into the earth.

section I

leda: Zeus, in the form of a swan, either raped her or consorted with Leda, depending on the source. From this event, Leda laid eggs which hatched Helen of Troy and Clytemnestra.

hera: Zeus' wife, queen of the gods, who must deal with her husband's many infidelities.

europa: Zeus transformed himself into a white bull and appeared to Europa, raping her on the island of Crete and leaving her there. Later, Zeus sent her gifts: a javelin that never missed its mark, Talos, a giant bronze soldier, and Laelaps, a hound that always caught what it hunted.

io: Zeus consorted with the princess Io and changed her into a heifer in order to cover up his infidelity to Hera.

section II

selene: Selene was the Greek personification of the moon who drove her chariot over the earth every night. She fell in love with a mortal named Endymion, and petitioned Zeus to grant him immortality and eternal sleep.

galatea: The sculptor Pygmalion fell in love with a female statue that he created and named Galatea. He prayed to Aphrodite that she become a real woman, and Aphrodite granted his request.

deinaira: Deinaira was the wife of the hero Hercules. After Hercules took a concubine named Iole, Deinaira feared that Hercules loved Iole more than her. She sent him a coat covered in a love potion given to her by a centaur. The love potion was actually a poison which killed Hercules.

anchises: The Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite tells the story of how Zeus made Aphrodite fall in love with a mortal hero, Anchises. She disguised herself as a virgin princess and seduced him. The scholar Walcott points out how this myth is a sort of foil to Zeus' stories— "for here it is the male who has been seduced and is racked with fear, and here it is the female who refuses any permanent arrangement and the male who is not to disclose the secret of a son's birth" (43).

adonis: When Adonis, a handsome youth that Aphrodite loved, was killed by a boar, Aphrodite established the festival Adonia in order to commemorate his death. The Adonia was exclusive to women, and the rituals included sprouting plants and then setting them on rooftops to wither and die. The classicist Laurialan Reitzammer in her book *The Athenian Adonia in Context: The Adonis Festival as Cultural Practice* argues this festival was actually a subversive way for women to express their own discontent with the gendered expectations of their society.

philomela: Philomela was raped by King Tereus, her sister Procne's husband. The King cut out Philomela's tongue so that she could tell no one of his crimes, but she made a weaving that communicated to her sister what he had done. Enraged, Procne killed her son and fed him to the King. When the King found out, he chased Procne and Philomela with an axe. The gods turned them both into birds so that they could escape.

echo & narcissus: Echo fell in love with Narcissus, who rejected her. Out of despair, she stopped eating until she was nothing but an echoing voice. Narcissus was cursed to fall in love with his own reflection because he rejected Echo.

laurel (daphne): The god Apollo tried to rape Daphne, who ran from him and prayed to her father, a river god, that she be turned into a tree in order to avoid being raped. When Apollo sees her, her hair is hanging down, "uncared for," and he says, "but what if it were combed?" (Ovid 1.490). Ovid says that Daphne, "wanting no part of any man... travelled the pathless groves" (1. 468).

actaeon: After Actaeon stumbled across Artemis bathing in the woods, she turned him into a stag and had his own dogs hunt and kill him.

niobe: Niobe was a mortal who boasted that she had more children than the goddesses Leto, mother of Apollo and Artemis. Hearing of her boast, Apollo and Artemis killed all of Niobe's children. After this, Niobe was turned to stone, and she wept constantly.

medusa: According to Ovid, Medusa was raped by Poseidon in Athena's temple. Athena, enraged, turned her into a gorgon.

arachne: Arachne was a weaver who challenged Athena, the goddess of weaving, to a competition. Athena could find no flaws in Arachne's weaving, so she beat her and tore up her work. Arachne hung herself in fear, and Athena turned her into a spider. Ovid deals with this myth in Book VI of his *Metamorphoses*. Nina McLaughlin's retelling of this myth in *Wake, Siren* inspired the poems "arachne" and "athena."

section III:

helen: Paris, a Trojan prince, was given Helen, supposedly the most beautiful woman in the world, by Aphrodite after he judged Aphrodite to be the most

beautiful goddess. Helen was the wife of Menelaus, and the Trojan War began with Helen's being taken from Menelaus.

iphigenia: Iphigenia was sacrificed by her father to the goddess Artemis.

clytemnestra: Iphigenia's mother and the wife of Agamemnon. Upset over Iphigenia's death, she murders Agamemnon when he returns from Troy.

hecuba: The mother of Hector and Paris, she was taken as a slave by Odysseus according to Euripides' *The Trojan Women*.

andromache: Andromache's husband, Hector, was killed by Achilles in the Trojan War. In *The Trojan Women*, Odysseus had Andromache's child killed to ensure that the Trojan line could not continue.

section V

calypso: Odysseus lived on Calypso's island, for seven years. Calypso loved Odysseus and kept him trapped with her, but Athena entreated Zeus to make Calypso let him return home.

penelope: I was inspired by Louise Gluck's *Meadowlands* and Margaret Atwood's *Penelopiad* to think differently about Penelope's desires and motivations in *The Odyssey*.

section VI

the amazons: The Amazons were a race of warrior women who lived separated from men. They cut off their right breast to show their denial of motherhood and male beauty standards.

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