Pearl Anthology: Prose Poems

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Abstract

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Pearl Anthology: Prose Poems

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Pearl Anthology: Prose Poems is a collection of prose poems, preceded by a critical introduction, that explore the ins and outs of queer femininity. The language of these poems borrows signs and symbols from Egyptian myth, augury, and hiking signposts. While utilizing surreal elements and dream logic, the poems aim to document the disorientation of a queer speaker as she tries to navigate a world of painful beauty rituals, queer love, and performative masculinity.
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We are, I am, you are
by cowardice or courage
the one who find our way
back to this scene
carrying a knife, a camera
a book of myths
in which
our names do not appear.

— from “Diving Into the Wreck,” Adrienne Rich

I like what the speaker of Rich’s poem “Diving Into the Wreck” is carrying—and I mean the things: knife, camera, book of myths. Though these things hold meaning on their own, they have a new meaning once brought together the way Rich does. One tool is the knife, perhaps carried for protection; it is a crude but easily hidden weapon. Another tool is the camera, something to document, perhaps something to provide an objective perspective. I can put myself in this poem because Rich makes that possible—she says we are, I am. She says our names. Something I want to do in my poetry is open this book of myths and address what’s missing, in order to create a more whole picture of a queer and female experience.

In her essay “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” Rich writes:

“Lesbian existence comprises both the breaking of taboo and the rejection of compulsory way of life…and lesbian existence has been lived…without access to any knowledge of tradition, continuity, social underpinning” (649). In other words, Rich argues that women who identify as lesbians have constructed their lesbian identity entirely from scratch—we are unable to consult a book of myths in which our names do appear. The contemporary lesbian existence is lived much the same way as when Rich was writing, as the templates for love and
intimacy provided by the mainstream media and pop culture continue to be clear reinforcements of heteronormativity.

When I think about the way I write my personal lesbian existence in my poetry, I understand the phrase the way Rich does; she uses the phrase “lesbian existence” rather than “lesbianism” because it suggests both “the historical presence of lesbians and our continuing creation of the meaning of that existence” (648). Rich provides a partner term for understanding lesbian existence: the lesbian continuum. According to Rich, the lesbian continuum includes a range “of woman-identified experience” that includes “many more forms of primary intensity between and among women, including the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical and political support” (648-49). In other words, the notion of “lesbian existence” refers to any experience that culminates in the bonding of two women. In fact, Rich explains that while the accepted patriarchal definition of “lesbian” results in a division between female friendship and the erotic, the phrase “lesbian continuum” allows us to view lesbian identity as a “bullet point” of woman-identified experience that includes female friendship and the lesbian erotic. By writing poetry that works towards an understanding of queer female experience, I’m able to create spaces in which traditional understandings of intimacy and the erotic are either rendered obsolete or subverted.

Both “The Pearl Diver” and “The Pearl Thief” are pieces that explore what this subversion of heteronormative understandings of intimacy looks like. In both poems, the speakers skirt heteronormative spaces and their expectations in order to achieve contact with a female addressee. In both of these poems I use pearls to symbolize female sexuality—an oyster resonates as an imagistic double for the vagina, its pearl the clitoris. In “The Pearl
Thief,” the speaker moves about a banquet hall unnoticed until she reaches a table where a doctor and his wife eat dinner. She is not a guest at this dinner party, but has managed to attend anyway, though no one has noticed her presence at all, let alone that she is different. At the end of the first verse-paragraph, she strikes: “I steal from a doctor what he thinks he owns. I unclasp a pearl necklace from his wife’s throat. I swallow her pearls one by one, then take her out for coffee.” Here, swallowing is a gesture that carries two-fold symbolism: it is both erotic and medicinal.

The second paragraph concerns both aspects, rendering the speaker’s erotic contact with femininity as a medical cure: “…the wife gives me honeybees fermented in syrup and lets me pull the pearls from her ears with my teeth. […] She drops the bees into hot milk, a remedy for the ache in my jaw, written under her tongue.” In this poem, both the doctor’s wife and the doctor have access to what the speaker does not—understanding the rules and regulations that come with existing in heteronormative spaces, such as a hotel’s banquet hall packed with coupled guests. In a moment of contact that happens in a space that is not the banquet hall, the speaker can access a remedy for the speaker’s difference: the doctor’s wife’s strange offering of fermented honey bees and hot milk is explained in the space underneath her tongue. After this exchange between the pearl thief and the doctor’s wife the rules of femininity (namely heterosexuality) do not apply: “The thread of her bracelet vanishes—the pearls bounce against the table. I swallow them quickly, become formless, resolute.”

This is only temporary—in the third section, the speaker returns to the banquet hall and encounters some difficulty integrating herself into the scene. She is aware of her difference as she moves about the space, she wants to arrange the objects that surround her so she is better suited: “I rearrange the silverware as I take the only empty seat.” After she is
finally allowed to take a seat at the table, the swallowed pearls return as a reminder of her inauthenticity. The line reads, “Too many pearls sit at the back of my throat; I cough them into a wine glass.” In the wife’s absence, the pearl thief sits in her seat—the doctor does not even notice, a sign of the speaker’s ability to move between two coded spaces with ease. The pearl metaphor comes full circle at the end of the poem, in the speaker’s feeling trapped in a world she does not fully belong in or understand: “I am beneath this roof, locked between the halves of an oyster.” Though the speaker might be able to move between two worlds, she never appears to belong in either.

The conceits of this poem are decidedly strange. Since I got my start in fiction, the thing I first knew I loved about writing was that my writing could be about whatever I wanted. I could tell whatever story I wanted to tell, however I wanted to tell it. It was a freeing realization. My first exposure to surrealism in prose poetry was Charles Simic’s book The World Doesn’t End (1985). I was drawn to the vivid and delightfully strange imagery, always made possible for me as a reader by Simic’s simple language and syntax. This book got me thinking about the relationship between a poem’s form and its content. The poems are mostly untitled and are no more than a page in length. The poems in The World Doesn’t End read like the speaker’s strange dreams—the poems’ normative syntax of works aptly describe their content so that the “suspension of disbelief” process becomes seamless.

In Simic’s poem “I was stolen by the gypsies…,” we experience this disorientation along with the speaker:

I was stolen by the gypsies. My parents stole me right back. Then the gypsies stole me again. This went on for some time. One minute I was in the caravan suckling the dark teat of my new mother, the next I sat at the long dining room table eating my breakfast with a silver spoon.
It was the first day of spring. One of my fathers was singing in the bathtub, the other one was painting a live sparrow the colors of a tropical bird. (13)

I love that this poem brings two different worlds together in a poem through one speaker’s experience of those two worlds. The speaker passes between the two worlds against his will, being stolen and stolen back, again and again. The worlds are not that different from each other, in fact, near the end, the speaker cannot tell the difference between his “two fathers,” a sentiment expressed through the image of a bird that is one thing (a sparrow) but looks like another (a tropical bird). The normative syntax allows the language of the poem to recede into the background, and we are left with this dream—the father is rendering a plain, everyday sparrow into an exotic bird, as dreams do with everyday life.

Simic’s surrealism is delightfully strange, playful, even. Our speaker is so sure it is happening that he delivers us the images in plain language, no stuttering, no astonishment, no strange syntax. My speakers are not as sure as Simic’s. While I recognize that utilizing elements of surrealism and heavy symbolism without the life-raft of simplistic syntax may come at the cost of an increased inaccessibility to my poems, I think that speaking from a surreal, dream-like landscape allows my readers to get a sense of what the speaker of my poems is feeling, and to get a sense of what a queer woman experiences in a heteronormative society on a daily basis. Because I’m a gay woman who can and often does pass as a straight one, I’m able to move between two seemingly discordant worlds. In the poems that explore this theme, the speaker’s ability to pass between goes unnoticed by the inhabitants of these worlds, who can interpret the signs and symbols of both worlds but can’t pass between them. At the same time, the speaker is constantly reminded of her own difference as she moves through each of those spaces.
What I’ve tried to capture in “The Pearl Thief” is this double-edged-sword-feeling—the power of being able to enter a world where one doesn’t belong in order to subvert what’s expected, but never feeling like you wholly belong any place. As the speaker swallows the pearls, she is taught to perform femininity so, she can play the role of the doctor’s wife perfectly fine—so fine that the doctor doesn’t even notice the difference between the speaker and his wife. But during her performance of femininity, she is reminded constantly of its artifice, as she is only able to imitate: she coughs up the hastily consumed pearls into the wine glass. This is one of many attempts to perform femininity by a speaker throughout the manuscript, and through each of these “failures” to perform, she is reminded of and then strengthened by the reminder of her own difference.

Like the pearl thief, my performances of femininity always come up short. There are many things that remind me of this, but putting on makeup is the most prominent example. When I put on eyeliner my hands shake. I have to redo lipstick over and over to get it right. I’m frustrated by being unable to perform and for trying to perform in the first place. I feel even more displaced when the other women I spend time with are able to perform certain aspects of femininity perfectly—they know which shade of blush to wear. They know how to apply lipstick quickly and correctly. I feel quasi-present, misunderstood, stuck. As a writer, I want the reader to feel what I’m feeling, and through the act of reading a poem where the speaker is disoriented as she makes her way through a strange world, I want them to get a taste of the disorientation I’ve experienced. Surrealism offers me the tools to distort and warp reality just enough to make you double take as you’re driving by.

Traditionally, surrealism can be defined as a movement in art, born during World War I out of Dada aesthetics, that makes use of unexpected juxtapositions of imagery, non-
sequitur, and surprise. During the heyday of the movement, surrealist painters created strange, dream-like scenes using everyday objects like Salvador Dali’s famous melted-clock painting *The Persistence of Memory* (1931). In the first *Manifesto of Surrealism* (1924), French poet André Breton defines surrealism as a system “based on the belief in the superior reality of certain forms of previously neglected association, in the omnipotence of dream, in the disinterested play of thought” (19). In other words, Breton argues that surrealism emerges as a result of two discordant realities butting up against one another. Surrealism’s logic does not function the way we expect it to; Breton says that is foolish of us to expect a surrealist piece of art to work in a familiar or expected way. It is not the relationship between the two objects that is of interest, “It is the juxtaposition of two terms, in some fortuitous manner, that as emitted a certain light, the light of the image, to which we show ourselves to be infinitely sensitive” (29). In other words, something new can be illuminated by juxtaposing seemingly unrelated images and objects with one another.

A catalogue of “The Pearl Thief’s” juxtapositions might mention the tension between the things consumed by the speaker: pearls, some red wine, and an odd remedy of honeybees in fermented syrup, suspended in a glass of hot milk. A reader can play a game of “one of these things is not like the other,” and will immediately select the remedy as the odd thing out—initially overlooking the fact that pearls are not for human consumption. The appeal of the surreal world works to override our initial objections to the logic of swallowing pearls—the poem is called “The Pearl Thief,” and the speaker continues to steal and consume pearls. From the first image, I communicate that the poem is going to be utilizing a different type of logic, but even what’s been established as a system can change as soon as the next sentence. This “disorientation” is an experience resembling the inability to tell if
you’re asleep or awake. There are no markers for this in either stage of wakefulness: dreams often feel real when we’re dreaming them; this is part of what makes nightmares so jarring to experience nightmares. For instance, a dream of mine might look like this: my very good friend and I are having dinner with a character from a television show I have recently been watching before bed. The house you are eating dinner is not your house, but you feel like it is your house. Surrealism works to rectify these contradictions of dream and reality by honing on and examining the “blips” that occur in the fabric of perception.

Breton argues in the provided definition that surrealism functions best through “psychic automatism,” a process of art-making that works to suppress the conscious mind in order to allow the unconscious mind more sway. One way to suppress the conscious mind is not to silence it, but to occupy it. Long drives to my hometown or to visit friends lend themselves to this process, but often times the best driving sessions have no destination or are towards new and unfamiliar locations; the drives have been described by others as “aimless.” It is not at all uncommon for me to drive myself somewhere unfamiliar, only to be tasked with then navigating my way back home. I find that occupying myself with a monotonous task like driving allows me to keep my conscious mind “busy” so that generating material becomes easier. When you consider the relationship between my writing process and the “finished product,” utilizing surrealism as the aesthetic vehicle makes sense.

It takes me a long time to come up with enough material for an entire poem. The triteness of this comparison is not lost on me, but at times, writing a poem feels like putting together a puzzle, in particular, the part where you are flipping the same piece around and around, trying to get it to fit. The key thing to note about this process is that it feels as though someone else has cut the puzzle piece for you, you’ve just got to find it and make
sure it fits. As someone who studies and loves literature and language, I'm married to the idea of intertextuality. This term, coined by theorist Julia Kristeva, “implies interdependence in that any text depends, in a sense, on those that have preceded it.” Furthermore, Kristeva argues that “a text does not exist as an isolated object but is a tissue of quotations and references, and that any text is the ‘absorption and transformation of another’” (Moore “intertextuality). In some cases, I recast already existing images and storylines from mythology in order to make all the pieces of the poem fit.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines a myth as “A traditional story, typically involving supernatural beings or forces, which embodies and provides an explanation, aetiology, or justification for something such as the early history of a society, a religious belief or ritual, or a natural phenomenon” (OED “myth”). Simultaneously, a myth embodies an unexplainable thing and justifies and/or provides an explanation for that unexplainable thing. We look towards an ancient civilization’s mythology to better understand that civilization—in order to gain a greater understanding, we make inferences based upon the outcomes of stories.

Each mythology has its own gods, origin stories, and texts. Stories from Greek mythology have been often co-opted as the creative vessels for artists’ own expressions—there are hundreds of poems and paintings that retell the stories of the gods and goddesses and dozens of movies and plays that retell their stories. While I’ve been interested in Egyptian mythology since childhood, the ubiquity of Greek mythology in literature and art certainly helped steer me toward pursuing this interest in my poetry. My first exposure to a writer subverting myth was Olga Broumas’ first book *Beginning with O* (1977). Through her
appropriation of a mythology well-known for its often reliance on excessive heterosexual sex as a plot device, Broumas is able to turn what’s expected on its head and queer the myth.

I want to talk about Broumas’s work in this book in two ways—the first of which involves her technique of reappropriating and subverting Greek myth. Broumas practices intertextuality throughout the whole collection, perhaps most strongly so in the poem “Leda and her Swan.” The intertextuality present here is two-fold. Not only is Broumas recasting the Greek myth of Leda and the Swan, in which Zeus, in the form of a swan, seduces Leda, she has two children with Zeus and two children with her husband. She’s also adding to the textual context of the William Butler Yeats poem about the same myth, called “Leda and the Swan.” While the “original” myth casts the interaction between Leda and the swan as seduction, the Yeats poem is more graphic; their interaction can be read as a rape. Just in her title alone, Broumas subverts Yeats’ appropriation of the myth—calling the poem “Leda and her Swan” allows Leda to hold the power in Broumas’ poem, shown here:

You have red toenails, chestnut
hair on your calves, oh let
me love you, the fathers
are lingering in the background
nodding assent.

I dream of you
shedding calico from
slow-motion breasts, I dream
of you leaving with
skinny women, I dream you know.

The fathers are nodding like
overdosed lechers, the fathers approve
with authority: Persian emperors, ordering
that the sun shall rise every dawn, set
each dusk. I dream.

White bathroom surfaces
rounded basins you
stand among
loosening
hair, arms, my senses.

The fathers are Dresden figurines
vestigial, anecdotal
small sculptures shaped
by the hands of nuns. Yours
crimson tipped, take no part in that
crude abnegation. Scarlet
liturgies shake our room, amaryllis blooms
in your upper thighs, water lily
on mine, fervent delta

the bed afloat, sheer
linen billowing
on the wind: Nile, Amazon, Mississippi.

The second aspect of Broumas’ writing that has influenced my own involves her
“queering” of the mythologies she appropriates. As we move into the second stanza, the
poem becomes a moment of interiority between speaker and addressee—between the swan
and Leda. The myth becomes queer in the first stanza:

You have red toenails, chestnut
hair on your calves, oh let
me love you, the fathers
are lingering in the background
nodding assent. (ll. 1-5)

Though it isn’t explicitly lesbian in regards to intimacy between two women, it is certainly
queer in terms of not heterosexual, not traditional. Here in the poem, female queerness is
observed and assessed by men, reminiscent of lesbian pornography produced by and for the
male gaze. But in the second stanza, the swan begins to dream, making the speaker and
addressee of the poem effectively “free:”

I dream of you
shedding calico from
slow-motion breasts, I dream
of you leaving with
skinny women, I dream you know. (ll. 6-10)

The intimacy so heavily scrutinized in “reality” is able to flourish in the dream of the speaker, which suggests the inability of queer, female intimacy to exist and flourish in a world where it is so heavily scrutinized.

In my poem “Little Sphinx,” I work primarily with the Egyptian myth of the sphinx, a mythical hybrid with the head of a human and the body of a lion. Those who cannot correctly answer the riddle of the sphinx must suffer the consequences, which sometimes includes death. The sphinx appears throughout both Greek mythology and Egyptian mythology with some key differences. As a creature, it is mythicized as merciless. But while both sphinxes serve as guardians of temples, the Egyptian sphinx is quite benevolent in comparison to the Greek one. All of these things work together on an intertextual level in order to inform my poem.

But our knowledge of ancient Egypt is sparse, since we only have fragments to go on. Everything was written on papyrus, which deteriorates rapidly. Because they symbolize ideas rather than just words and letters, Egyptian hieroglyphs are difficult to translate into English (or any other modern language for that matter), so a good portion of our knowledge surrounding ancient Egypt, surrounding the mythology, even, is inference. I am no archaeologist, but I find that the further back you step, the more complete an image you will be able to see.

That is why I couldn’t rely solely on the sphinx and its riddle for “Little Sphinx;” I had to examine the holistic image of the sphinx and all its components. I considered the
hidden meanings of the physical site of the most famous sphinx—the one that rests before
the three pyramids at Giza. When the poem opens, the speaker is no different from anyone
who comes to greet the sphinx: she does not know why the creature has chosen to rest
where it does, which underscores the statue’s cultural mystery. The lines “Each time you
turn your head, three kings die,” “aching to see the houses of dead men,” and “The three
houses loom” all refer to the three pyramids that can be found behind the sphinx statue in
Egypt.

For me, the symbolism of mythology is what makes using it in poetry so much fun. Symbols are arbitrary, which is how you can recast them—make them mean something else in the context of your poem. It’s an expansion of context, not a revision of one. In light of intertextuality, it’s important to remember that nothing can exist in a vacuum. An image or text is continually informed by its many surrounding situations at all times. For example, when I call the poem “Little Sphinx,” I can’t change the fact that anyone who reads the title is probably going to think of the mythical creature, of the famous statue that stands in Egypt to this day. I don’t think these thoughts detract from the meaning, I think they add to it by helping to create a more holistic picture for the reader.

Mythology is grand and accessible but leaves those who experience it with many
questions. I like Egyptian mythology because so much of it is missing. Like Adrienne Rich’s book of myths with missing names in “Diving into the Wreck,” the absence of complete records in Egyptian mythology prompts me to probe for what’s missing. Is there a way to I think the prose poem can be terrifyingly infinite.

In the introduction to an anthology called *Great American Prose Poems*, David Lehman reminds us that “Writers are under no obligation to classify their writing for us” (14). It is
difficult to discuss the content of my poems without talking about their form. It is difficult to discuss poetic surrealism without discussing prose poetry. Lehman pools metaphors and definitions for prose poetry together to better understand the form. Simic invites us to think of it as a “veritable literary hybrid,” as “the sole instance we have of squaring the circle” (14). If verse and prose are discordant worlds, the prose poem as a literary form is the attempt to rectify each half’s aesthetic shortcomings.

I don’t consider the prose poem to be a poem written “without form” or simply just “a poem written in prose.” While they contain elements of prose as well as elements of poetry, the form is more than just the sum of these parts. I love lineated poetry, and I think it’s beautiful. But there’s a certain freedom that’s afforded to you when you begin to write without the line break. Lehman writes, “It is just the sentence and the paragraph must act the part of the line and the stanza, and there are fewer rules and governing traditions to observe, or different ones…. ” (14). In other words, when you give up the line break, you gain a sense of freedom from the traditional rules that accompany them. “Writing in prose you give up much, but you gain relaxation, in the possibilities of humor and incongruity, in narrative compression, and in the feeling of escape or release from tradition or expectation” (23).

So the prose poem, though born from the two traditions of verse and prose, can work outside of them, never wholly belonging to either, much like the pearl thief. Because the prose poem lacks “blanket rules” that can accompany lineated work as a form, it shies away from tradition. In doing so, the prose poem can be considered a queer form (in the “nontraditional” definition of the word) that is suited to queer content (again, in “nontraditional;” here read as “nonheterosexual”). Like the pearl thief dutifully arranging the
silverware so that it makes sense to her, I utilize the imagery and language from Egyptian
myth to rearrange traditional mythological content according to nontraditional standards.

Works Cited


“Diving into the Wreck.” Poets.org,


Pearl Anthology: Prose Poems
The Pearl Thief

I unhinge a door and slip into a hotel banquet hall. I move unnoticed through the evening as memory, as idea. Glasses clink and laughs cling to the carpet. Veal bones picked clean fall from my fingers and I weave among tables, breaking cakes of cornbread. I steal from a doctor what he thinks he owns. I unclasp a pearl necklace from his wife’s throat. I swallow her pearls one by one, then take her out for coffee.

Over lattes, the wife gives me honeybees fermented in syrup and lets me pull the pearls from her ears with my teeth. My boats sought her, followed the trail of shells left at her ankles. She drops the bees into hot milk, a remedy for the ache in my jaw, written under her tongue. The thread of her bracelet vanishes—the pearls bounce against the table. I swallow them quickly, become formless, resolute.

Above sound, I move slowly. Through the eye of a needle, I return in time to pick chocolate shavings from glasses of strawberry mousse. I rearrange the silverware as I take the only empty seat. Too many pearls sit at the back of my throat; I cough them into a wine glass where they sit immersed in deep red. “Call the sitter and tell her we’ll be late,” the doctor whispers to me, we’re having too much fun. I am beneath this roof, locked between the halves of an oyster.
Folie á Duex

A stillness lines my pockets this evening. I am searching for a wind strong enough to shake my teeth from alignment. But nothing between us will dissolve, only transform: your seduction now mimicry. Absence reduces nothing but meaning, harshens the violence of a dropped mirror. Your tongue curls around the pill of my earlobe. I peel a lemon, eat it like an apple.

I turn each kernel and swallow its opposite. Your window, my mirror. A repositioned neck—a reguided hand. Here is where you say something about stopped clocks. Something about desire. I swallow an incomplete symmetry. Your black eyes close against a projection of the sea. I would believe the moon if it would settle in the soft wash of water, listen to the star call back: “goodnight.”
Night Animals

A voice steps into a tower and provides the hour for the sky. Children chalk the black street with honesty. I skip the earliest part of the evening, noticing that the milk I’ve left for the stray cat has drowned several bees. The stray cat steps forward, carrying the body of a finch in its mouth. I lift the bird by its wing—it’s eyes will not close.
Clocks have no power here—it is never Sunday and the pool is always closed. The unease of quick dinner still hangs from the ceiling, inviting the coyote inside. The animal takes up residence in my bedroom, spends its nights chewing through the box springs on its way to me. It can smell my backbone through the sheets. An owl rises from my driveway and rests on a wire. In its mouth it holds the keys to a building that no longer exists. The owl leaves behind your name in the space between two languages I cannot speak.
On Smearing the Lipstick

I smear the lipstick from your mouth with my thumb, hold your jaw steady and ask, “how do you say ‘girl with the honest eyes’ in French? What’s the word for ‘wet chamomile pressed against a porcelain cup’—” Glass marbles fall to the floor, clicking against the tile and each other, the way your fingernails would sound ticking against the Formica, if you had any. Everything is happening to me here, in this kitchen that is now a car, and the first voice I hear isn’t my own; it’s you, telling me to believe in the moon but to keep it simple. I am seeds in translucent amber, I am tied neatly to a beam in the ceiling, suspended in a peroxide dream. Can I undress you here, or are you afraid the light from the other room might see the white of your smile? There’s a wrinkle in your sweater on the small of your back. This I can fix. It was only a dream, you said. You will not fake anything with me. I am not wearing my seatbelt. The water is boiling.
Red Hour, Red Kitchen

This kitchen, empty again of your body but not the excitement of your return, filled also by the thick steam rising from resting bowls. It obscures my reflection in the window but sharpens your voice—you tell me I’m late for breakfast but I’ve already eaten the clock, swallowed the hands and the numbers. This kitchen is no place for a meal—electric, breathing. Witness. This kitchen belongs to neither of us; a faucet drips, keeps time. This kitchen holds its tongue while it watches a spoon drop, watches you open my mouth with your thumb. You know the answer that you’re looking for—a white moth rises from my throat, you catch it between your teeth. I risk my tongue to take it back, taste the way electricity can make a loose wire live—if this kitchen had hands, it would pick up the spoon, cut the steam, it would help me. We make a bed from a matchbox, you position me in front of the window, wipe the fog from the glass with the scarf at your neck. Our reflection: you releasing the moth at my bare shoulder. It walks to my ear and says what you are afraid to: color all of this red, so red that there are no other colors; all this and the silverware. All this red, and you: you have been sitting next to me your entire life, but you have never bothered to learn my name.
Between the Dog and the Wolf

The woman sits, taps her fingernails against the dashboard, asks for the song that just ended to be played again. And the woman read all my letters, promised gentleness, soft light. And that same woman misunderstands me, but I climb inside her empty glass anyway, all the while murmuring, “that’s not what I meant.” Once behind the glass, I fear the car will shift into drive on its own, not because the stillness has agitated it, but because it doesn’t know how to do anything else. The air is acting like water, turning my breath against me.

She lies back, looks into the yellow overhead light and then into me. She cuts the silence with a request. “Tell me again about the end of the world,” she says. “The one where the dog swallows the sun.” I tell her that it’s a wolf that takes the sun in its jaws, always toward the horizon. You want to ask a scientist the difference between the dog and the wolf, knowing it’s a difference so small it can only be measured in terms neither of us will ever understand.

When I drive that woman home I always drive west, into the sun—a summer star that cannot be buried, only carried long distances, out of sight. I imagine that small difference doesn’t matter, especially in a place where the wolves keep dogs as pets. This answer seems to satisfy her, but I know better. She asks what that makes her and I say a spoon, heated and wrapped around my finger. She smirks and checks the status of her lipstick against a gold and shadowless light.
On Breathing

People can only leave this town the way light leaves a room when you flip the switch—all at once, not in waves. We have lived here for a long time, going out in twos and threes and fours. We dust each other’s breaths with black salt so we can see ourselves breathe. We don’t believe we can anymore. I stand on your shoulders, string silver keys between telephone poles in an attempt to summon the wind. We haven’t smelled it in months. You weave orange peel into my hair in the bathtub, drop the braid against my bare back like a second spine. My mother fears you will sever the braid at the base of my neck and so do I. How many times will we reach the base of the mountain, face the sign that reads “Do not resuscitate” and turn back? We will the round that corner again, plan again to travel to a city where we can breathe. Silver keys glint in the streetlight but rest, with their teeth in the light. The stillness keeps out the weather, but not the man who lives in the shrub at the end of our street. He tells me that there are only poems about love and compulsion. But what about breathing, I ask him. He tells me that I am a child, that the Latin for breath also means spirit. He coughs, coos at a stray cat that has no idea it is breathing.
Reverse Augury

A bird sits in the crook of a tree branch and repeats its own name. I smear ripe figs along the wall, an augury in reverse: I show the bird how to turn a noun into a verb, how fragile both of them can be. Like all lessons, this one can only work if the bird and I reach some sort of understanding. We can only agree that if a woman turns her jaw toward the sun and startles three crows into my sight, the bird and I must build a city in every place she rests. With smoke and spit and sleight of hand, we weave a nest around her body every evening, to ensure that she will bring another sunrise. I dream of her tongue touching the sunlight on my neck as I knife into a tree trunk the outline of an apple that no one can tell is an apple. I fear a passing wasp will mistake it for a fig and climb inside, only to die her little death for nothing. All at once I am chasing that woman through a house with many rooms, each room lit only by the one adjacent to it. Just as I pass through their doors, she disappears. The kitchen is a dead end where a crow gets the honor of lighting her cigarette. He holds the match just like I had planned to, only he forgets to lick his lip ever so slightly when her mouth closes around the filter. I can feel the morning fracturing my surroundings and only then do I find the answer on her jawline. I am drawn backward by hair through a dauntless and resolute door in the sun.
Red Window, Red Door

Each morning that I rise from this bed, I think I have made progress. You didn’t sleep and thus, you did not dream about us at the casino—you know I’d love to have a cigarette indoors. No, you’ve been up all night, redrawing the map. Its legend reads: the book will tell you how far it wants to be opened. The spare key underneath my tongue sours and rusts behind my teeth—I am locked out of the house. Through the red window: a blackbird—perched on your shoulder, feathers glinting in the kitchen light, wings cast a matching shadow on your skin. The blackbird lets down your hair, looks at me through the glass, pecks the windowsill.

On the other side of the red door: you twisting the lock, you whispering through the mail slot, “Tell me what your hands did before—who was there to witness?” I understand that you are not asking whose hair I’ve touched. A blackbird lays a key at my feet, and the mail slot disappears, or was never there at all. I have been in this house before. What does a fair trade look like: my name swells at the back of your throat but never reaches your lips; I have forgotten to lock the door behind me—again. I am hiding my neck with a scarf, but you still recognize me.
The Pearl Diver

To the fisherman’s wife, my pearl diver: press your thumb into my palm, fillet me beneath the surface. You’ll find what you want, growing diligently there along the muscle. You know oysters make pearls to protect themselves, sand swallowed by accident, value attributed to a mistake: are you looking my way or is it a trick of the light, your foot finding mine under the table. Did I swallow these names or did you put them there? The latter: it’s fake, it’s ruse—drop the loincloth, it’s me: the fisherman; don’t you recognize me, darling? Question: when does the pearl diver have to come up for air?

Answer: she can fillet a dozen oysters before she rises to the surface. She will pass me the pearl from beneath her tongue, it’s me: her best friend. The fisherman is always clueless. I am formless and covered in denim and I can vomit a whole necklace you don’t believe me but watch this—I’ll suck his name from your mouth, swallow it whole—just because this is fake doesn’t mean it’s free. You’ll break through the surface, hand above your head. The fisherman watches your body, he doesn’t see me: I am locked between the valves of the oyster in your palm, I rest beneath this wet and terrible roof.
Dreamscape with Birds, with Childbirth

A man fires a round into the rafters, drops a sparrow’s body into my shopping cart. Body, commodity—what price would you pay for a sparrow’s body split by a bullet too large? Another into my purse, remembered to open his wings when he lost his footing—buy one get one free. “Ma’am we’ve closed the store to collect these birds, you’re the only one in here. You’re the only one.” But my mother is here with me, here in the way the wind visits places and—“put these back,” she says, gesturing to the birds, “you’re having a baby, after all.” I climb into the shopping cart to protect their bodies with my own. I bend at the hip with ease. When I tell her I will not have this baby, I call my mother by her first name.

“What are you having?” asks the man with the rifle at the end of the isle. My mother pushes the shopping cart forward. I hold the birds up to the man with the rifle. I’m telling him to look at what he’s done, pitting the bullets from the feathered bodies. “Twins!” To my mother: “right this way.” I tell my mother I can’t breathe and she reminds me again, to quit smoking. This hospital is no place for your attitude! “Where’s the father of the baby?” A gunshot. Everything is happening to me here, the man in the rifle is searching for a fault in my spine’s design—just a second, you’re going to feel so much better after this kicks in—my mother, telling me “everything will change once you hold the baby in your arms.” Breech, cesarean, remember your work, Jessica—don’t hold your breath, don’t take it for granted—breathe (Latin: spiritus).

I cough a sparrow into my hands. She preens her tail. The man with the rifle fires again, splits the glass window from its frame.
On Ending the Lives of Frogs

Recoil of a .45, my lip is split by black steel and my father is laughing. I'm in a cathedral and everything here is made of glass. I spit a tooth into my hand and climb inside the belled stemware. This is the way to West Virginia, to a town where everyone shares my last name. He tells me that time moves backwards when you travel by freeway. He is pulling stitches from his forearm with his teeth, the same way he pulls the smoke from a joint as he hangs a row of raccoons by their tails, their mouths hanging open to be cured by the air. My father is laughing. I swallow my tooth. The carcass of a bullfrog rises to the pond’s surface.
Recoil Queen

Yes, I would just like to say I’m sailing with the rock, and I’ll be back, like Independence Day, with Jesus. June 6, like the movie. Big mother ship and all, I’ll be back, I’ll be back.
—Aileen Wuornos’ last words: 9:47 AM, October 9, 2002

You saved his eyes for last, you said: I can’t do this anymore. I shot and killed a man—at this point, it wasn’t your fault. Firing a pistol into a tree to make your girlfriend laugh was enough, yes, her laugh was enough. On the stand you said, “I saved his eyes for last.” Weren’t you just sitting around in a cell, you said, thinking about what might make a good story? Not insane? Listen up—this is the last time I’m gonna say it—you have to kill Aileen Wuornos, because she’ll kill again. Translation: no one should go with a lie in her throat. Did I put those words in your mouth—are you more sinister than I want you to be?

“I knew she was a dyke, I didn’t know she was a murderer.” AILEEN WUORNOS, centerfold of the National Enquirer—AMERICA’S FIRST!—they say you sucked chicken bones clean before you died—or did you let a single cup of black coffee go cold; Lee, you’re a terrible negotiator—A FEMALE SERIAL KILLER—your voice was never priced lower than two bullets. Aileen Wuornos: “lesbian of circumstance,” the “man-hating lesbian serial killer.” Aileen Wuornos, who are you? I’ll be back, I’ll be back.
Flashpoint

_Volatile_—what might fly, what will vaporize. Transient, readily disappearing. Stones are hiding there, in my clenched fists. My father planted this fire in my throat. I raised the ember, I deserve its bloom, a scar thick with heat. My father would be proud of me, my anger is a white-hot streetlamp reaching for the sky, except I didn’t break that motherfucker’s cheekbone by slamming his face against a concrete curb. But I wanted to. And he deserved it—_volatile_: what has the _tendency_ to vaporize, resists distillation, unbroken beer bottles, swallowed matchbook. See also: a motorcycle with a full gas tank waits for collision beneath a sheet in the garage. _Watch yourself_, he tells me, _that tinderbox in your throat isn’t doing you any favors._
On Resurrecting Fish

The treasure hunter steps into his painting, making weather and breathing life back into the mouths of fish. He pulls the hooks from their lips and swallows them whole. The treasure hunter is my brother, he’s the space between the trees and the river, the one who weighs my heart against an eagle’s feather.

He pulls gold from rivers, never allowing himself the violence of a pick-axe splitting rock. He paints a fish on a pin-up girl’s back. She lets the sparrows out of their jars. I peel the fish from her skin and drop it into the water. “You’re violent enough for a pickaxe,” the fish whispers, watching my fingers curl around one’s handle.

The treasure hunter trains sparrows to dive into the undertow and pluck gold from beneath the rocks. They spin his hair into gold thread and use it to weave nests inside their jars. “We have to keep things cyclic,” my brother reminds me. I pull a fish from the river that’s swallowed my hook. With bleeding gills, it tells me to keep moving.
Small Deaths

Something lives only as long as we remember it—the hour of the slow-moving train, some exchange at the neck beneath the cover offered by her hair. A rehearsal for a small death, mine, then hers—hands outstretched, then with her fingers, more finely gesturing—and she’ll laugh without making a sound, before she begins: “In the field where I’ll die—the rattle of an approaching shopping cart, you know, and tire tread: a slow delayed bleeding.” She bares her teeth to the moon, his light bleaches, it obscures. In the field where I die, there is a bell, somewhere: this is what it feels like, my want for the turn of that wrist in someone else. She repeats herself, reminds me how fragile it all is, reminds me January’s breaths are cleaner than we, as humans, could ever be. And I think she’s speaking, but I can’t tell—“if we’re so awful, then what about children—” Yes, what about them—the children are always honest. The children will listen.
“Rise and eat,” my father says, holding an open knife in his right hand. He could drown a star in its own light, standing in the kitchen donned in a jacket of familiar air. I hold a bird like a soft fruit, spread the feathers of her wing between the blades of my scissors. I feel her breath on the back of my finger. My father is holding the needle, sewing together the three parts of my shadow and cracking eggs onto the hot sidewalk. My car folds itself around a telephone pole. The restaurant doesn’t know he’s taking a break, taking his time folding handwritten directions to tow my car. The white billiard ball breaks the triangle and he’s skinning an apple with a pocket knife. “Who the fuck are you?” he asks me. The bird answers him, in a human voice: “I am your son.”
Mirror Test

Every evening, I place a mirror in front of a magpie and wait for her ask me about the origin of her eyes. I greet the moon while I wait, bet him a cherry’s pit for a few days of his light. He pinches salt into an ashtray, tosses the dice. Another magpie enters the bedroom through an empty flowerpot, swallows the cherry pit and the dice. Behind me, the magpie asks the mirror: “who gave you that face?”

I misremember my mother’s face as my own, let the light trick me. Every day, I look for the looseness of her teeth in my mouth, try to find the gauntness of her skull-bones beneath my skin. Every time you speak, you repeat—this is said of birds; another magpie at the windowsill, head cocked, black eyes fixed—yes, my mother gave me this face.

The clock ticks with a rhythm that unsettles, a lullaby hot enough to melt glass. I swallow two names between ticks, cough one back into my hands. The wet pulp stains every dress, reminds me symmetry is always a deck stacked by someone else. The magpie at the mirror and the one at the window: “who?”

A talisman becomes an omen when it looks within, but two magpies offer me an orphaned fortune in a language I can’t speak—a circle of pennies and wild grass. Another trick of the light: yes, your mother gave you that face. The magpies fly toward the moon. He translates the message: “even the men who are stainless white have three faces.”
Little Sphinx

I do not know why you have chosen to rest here, with your face shadowed by the moon. No one pays enough attention to birds gathering, to the cadence of your laugh, but I do: when you turn your head, three kings die—one father, his two sons—each of these men resting behind you. The moon rises again, charts my passing through this little harbor. You told me you were coming with the white of your teeth, the setting sun carving contrast from shadow. What has one voice but many feet, one heart but many hands? I core an apple with a pocket knife and this impresses you. I climb your body to whisper the answer in your ear: “your songs.” I go with you, aching to see the houses of dead men—they are further away than they appear. The horizon silvers the sand, the moon splits a shadow and from it you emerge, bones heavy with winter—from the car, from your bedroom, always with new hair, always in profile. There are two women: one gives birth to the other, and the other in turn, gives birth to the first. Who are the two women? The three houses loom, your hand reaches for my throat—who? My lovers: the night. The day.
Aubade with Bowl of Ribbon

Your fingers work the peel from another orange: you split the miniature sun with your fingernail, freeing the pith from the center as one frees the lip of an envelope from its body. I eat the You keep asking me, “is that all?” You bleed the tea bags dry, the taste of the fifth cup barely tea at all.
The real danger of fire is that it doesn’t think, it only moves: your hair pulls light like glass, aches orange. I will choose to remember you like this, in your kitchen giving me the basics—you prefer a stain over the liability of lipstick, but you show me both because you know I love a stubborn red, the art of it all. I was taught this placement of signs as little girl, a symmetry I can never manage to replicate when alone.

I make sure I can see you across the table’s corner, even with my heavy eyes. You are counting, and I am driving. If I’m looking hard enough at the horizon, I can see you there—a bowl of ribbon. A search party for a shadow in the dark.
On Constructing the Ghost

I am teaching the significance of a broken chandelier as it falls toward me. A token of glass catches itself on my sweater—my tour guide of what’s breakable, what can be viewed but never touched. The projection of this image stretches across the underside of my wrist and what is borrowed is now apparent.

How does one package instructions for constructing the ghost? I say, “Take away form, give it agency.” The ghost’s thoughts will come on their own, unless they don’t. Next time, I will say “unleash your ghost where it might interact with the living, make the living say, “silence is not merely the absence of noise, nor the absence of noise combined with stasis. It is always something else.”

Borrowings become projections—a museum, evoking the dream of possession before evacuating it. I turn on the light before the chandelier can hit the floor. “This is how you take away form,” I will say. Ask a question, and you will first receive silence. Then thought. A ghost made this way will pass through a fire unharmed, but believe that its body is burning.
To Stick a Pin Through a Butterfly

Her morning is as honest as the party is long—a sunrise yields the weight of water. She comes by in the name of afternoons, wet-sand-on-your-skin—astonishment, asymptomatic. She knows I have one heart and many hands. Split apples offer whispers, the body of a bee held steady, labeled. At the end of my suffering there is contact, there are knuckles to darkness to smoke clinging, like it does, to her fingers, to her hair.

An invite: to the nape of her neck, where lightning meets tree or sand (where it makes glass). I changed the eye and revealed the mouth, choosing a silk scarf and a knowledge of emergency. The sewing pin between her fingers belongs in my abdomen; she’s a lousy shot. Finger dipped in the pool—quiet, inconsistent, rough hands, whitest panic—listen to me. It will happen this way: I will unfold the notes of her skin, disturb the symmetry of her eyes.
Fifth Season

Moonlight’s twin straddles the line between lunar and aura. From the orchard to this, the night the silverware will leave the drawer. Here you are too strong to fold and everything you do is fast and sharp and then—the rash of snow on my wrist melts to dew, the skin opens. You drop the scissors. Grab your car keys.
Repetition is the way of the obsessor—the believer. You tell me to say I lit the fire that burned me. My injury; crudely wrapped, unsatisfied. To the doctor: “I regret asking a question of something I couldn’t touch.” Behind my eye, a lamp, trapped under a bowl. They reward my accident with stitches I can’t get wet.
You know that the flying arrow appears motionless except for the moment before it strikes the target. You know. With a fistful of wet matches, I try to suck the wind from a lion’s mouth: we sit at the bottom of the shower in silence and I am washing your hair, again. “You know better,” you say. Hell is the bell that will not ring again.
The Giving of Violets

She said, ‘Oh how badly things have turned out for us. I swear, against my will I leave you.’

—Sappho [94]

I

I work against the dawn’s light, weaving uprooted violets into wreaths—those lavender, unreflective things, invisible against my palms. An apple rolls toward me, and the archer follows.

She dons a necklace of violets and the petals against her neck become as vivid as bandages.

She strikes a match against her wrist, drops the spent body into the dew headfirst. I hold the apple in my palm like a small bird and she fires an arrow through both, pinning the fruit to my hand as if to say “all of this is not ordinary—but you will grow accustomed to it.”

The archer is in the business of identifying problems I did not know I had. I would not think to touch the sky with two arms, and that is precisely my problem, she says, that I would not think.

II

I spend 3 winters pinching salt into a well, listening for it to stop falling, for something made with throat or needle. It comes:

Superstitious little girl, yes, you, violet weaver: you must go. You must pull the arrow from your palm and go. Her quiver is full.

The air around her rings for you, but she is no door. All of this is not ordinary: after she goes, you will misread everything as a warning.