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Mother, Maiden, Moon

Written and Arranged
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Letter to the Reader

Dearest Reader,

Welcome to my first ever collection of poetry, *Mother, Maiden, Moon*. I am so blessed to have caught your attention, and hope to keep it over the course of these twenty-eight poems. To begin, I never thought I would write poems seriously, let alone have my entire senior project be a collection of them. When I first arrived at Purchase College I was here to strictly write fiction, and poetry was just a required steppingstone to allow me to continue to write the fiction I was so passionate about. A lot has changed over these past four years, and now, I cannot imagine my senior project being anything but a collection of my poetry.

I took Poetic Techniques as everyone in my program does, and it made me realize and appreciate poems as a form of puzzle. Each poem had to be crafted with attention to word choice, form, and spacing— each theme had to be chosen carefully, precisely, and needed to exist in every line and word of a poem. At the time, poems were harmless fun and a good way to warm up before writing fiction. It was in my junior year of college that I once again returned to poetry, now having read poets like Brenda Shaughnessy, Ocean Vuong, and Sylvia Plath. This time around I began to see poetry as a form of communication, philosophy, and visual art. Poetry became more expansive as I took in the works of writers like Richard Siken, Louise Glück, and Jericho Brown. They spoke about nature, God, family, and heritage in ways I never thought possible in so few words. They used form and enjambment to infuse their poetry with visual language which inspired me to experiment with the boundaries of what a poem could be and look like.

Poetry helped me process and give voice to things I'd never expressed. The complexities of being of a mixed heritage, of being Puerto Rican, a daughter, a sister, a friend. When I sat to begin this collection, looking over all my past poetry, I realized this collection was a self-portrait, a picture of who I am in this moment and something that will continue to represent this phase of my life as I continue my path as a writer, a reader, and a poet.

Each poem in the collection belongs to one of four sections. The first, Genesis, explores religion, godhood, worship, and power structures. Pleiades, the second, focuses on personal relationships, family, and history, followed by Galatea, which highlights themes of gender, womanhood, and the self. The final section is Phil, which examines the seven forms of love. Each of the twenty-eight poems in the collection have a title and subtitle, the title is fairly self-explanatory, but the subtitles mean different things depending on the section. In Genesis, each poem is a prayer, as poems have historically functioned, and each prayer is directed to a different entity or group. In Pleiades, the subtitles denote a specific person to whom each poem is addressed/dedicated, speaking to the section's emphasis on family and history. In Galatea, the poems are all to a part of the self, and this section acts the most in the direction of a self-portrait. In Phil, the poems are all subtitled with one of the seven Grecian forms of love and explore the themes of each. Together these poems form a picture that is echoed in the title of *Mother, Maiden, Moon*. With emphasis on family, but especially the idea of motherhood, childhood/maidenhood, and the moon, which represents the ethereal and overbearing nature of Earth, God, and belief.

I am so excited for you to go forth and read this collection. I am far from a perfect or even polished poet, but nonetheless I am proud of the work contained in this collection and hope

that something here resonates with you. Now without further ado, please read and enjoy *Mother, Maiden, Moon*.

With Love,

Cielo N. Howell

GENESIS

The Pagan
Prayer to Parents

She spoons herself
asking forgiveness of Winter
He pities her
Autumn was not so kind,

She wears her beaded belt
The Pagan curses
*I am different from you,
for the love you give
starves me,*

She dances to
singing woodland winds
*I am free, I am free,
Your little girl
is dead.*

Into the hands of God
She clings to her father's robes
with her red clippings—
wings once sewn to shoulder bones.

Made for begging
daughter's love— bent like Spring,
she sings like a rabbit howling
*I want it all, for the moon
cradles me.*

The idea of a mother
to a girl so broken—
*Take me. I am still
waiting for summer. Mother
I want to go home.*

*Ah, my other self—
Forgive me. I did not mean
to become such a weight.
My season has come to
break me further, so sister,
Let us sink.*

Judges 19

Prayer to the Ancient Woman

1

What is her wrath? Of the
woman scorned and told to rot,
Of the kings in her bed made to
revel, Of the olden times and the
New.

3

In those days Israel had no king
she was a concubine
home stolen, body stolen
she dipped her tongue
into holy waters— Tasting freedom.

5

Sheltered
virgin daughter, concubine
offered meat-like for the feast
of man hunger and angry wants
left to wilt for the sake of the sand.

7

Set out of the hearth
where warmth becomes worry
eaten by men
concubine, unwifed woman
set to join wife destiny.

9

Dawn falls like a veil against her
shattered self clatters broken
peeled atop the door
she feels daylight kiss her
like the lover that condemned her here.

11

In death the woman is free

2

Read the fate of the shallow
the half man,
the unpenised heathen
shaftless and unstructured, born
to bow then to break.

4

Traveling on man thought
no say in the pull from her father
left to wander at the behest
of a lustless man
she did not cherish.

6

“I will bring them out to you now
you can use them
do to them
whatever you wish, but as for the man
don’t do such an outrageous thing.”

8

Death is the destiny
violation is the curse
of the baby bed or the man vultures
her soul is sealed in his choice
his unlove.

10

Her hands on the threshold
of a home
man looks upon her
she is dead, she is dead
he commands her Rise.

12

Into twelve dissections

no longer concubine
he rages against this freedom
someone has taken
what was never truly his.

she is turned to a message
she was always a message
do not be born to the uncrowned sex
there is no justice for the wombed.

The Pit
Prayer to the Unanswered

//Are you there God?\\

The creator seeded them here in the damp Earth
formed of a rib, formed of clay, scooped from
beneath his mighty foot. They were the insects,
small and lustful, wanting more than they were
given; so taking, taking more. They are human.

Love is an impulse. Bringing them closer together,
fate-tied, tongue twisted, stomach churned. The
love offered to them by the other is one of porcupine
quills, shivering for warmth, receiving sharp pain.
Anguish for the lust that wraps their mortal minds.

//Do I believe in you?\\

Creator of the sky, the sea, the people, the promise,
maker of destinies, heroes and villains, of family,
there is something insidious about the power held
by God. Shifter of minds, wielder of money and sin
God put them here and watches or abandons the lost.

How many miracles went undone? His son on the
cross, His blood streaming down the face of a people.
Crown of thorns, King of the lost. What happened to
kindness? In these lives led by insignificant people,
where is there space for the pressure of his divinity?

//Do you believe in me?\\

Clockwork, tick tock, mortality, livelihood, wealth;
do they learn to treasure the destiny of ants, made to
serve, made to consume and work, and die. The queen
is chosen, not by God, but by blood— The God of those
wanderers has been bought and bribed by men in gold.

Is this the biblical fate? Where is the God of love? The

God of purpose? Who etches the cemetery stone, marks graves, chooses heaven or hell? Is a life lived in service a life lived at all? Where is freedom? When all else is lost what becomes of the pit, the one inside the hearts of man?

Tree of God

Prayer to my Grandmother's Banyan Tree

Roots stretched in a star
sudden ache of the cosmos
a dripping solar ichor
falls to a nebula seedbed.

The tree tells of ancient civilizations
those known and forgotten live in each
pressed indent of her flesh. Bark, some
say, though that name is foreign to her
as she grows bathed in starlight. Words
mouthed by the pollinators of the sky,
the comets, meteors, asteroids, which
all deliver new seeds, new stories, from
which she swallows and births them new.

A human child travels near
the warmth of companionship in her roots
the child touches her rough skin
with climbing hands begging what's within.

The tree knows of suns and stars from
moon lagoons of light life-strewn. She
knows the human hates and wants which
drive flames and cuts into kindred bark.
But her mothering nature takes a firm hold,
in the child's ear her winds whisper things
not once told. Of war and dreams, histories,
hopes; she asks the child to hold her words
close, and sing out the knowledge of love.

Humans find the sacred cosmic grove
they deem it a bounty, a treasure trove
using flames they burn her ancient flesh
to find what lies beneath her skin.

The child, now grown, stands on a tree's
dark grave, looking down on ash born of man's

greed and rage. Sage, the wisdom passed to
him remains, the bounty given a tree star-made.
The man, full grown, addresses the people, he
speaks of greed, of lust, of evil. The choice of love,
he says, lives in them all what they must do is
answer love's divine call. The men are split with
guilt and shame, half choose love and half choose pain.

Driven by shame the humans rebuild
upon the land where the tree once stood
guided by her wants and words
they come together to begin a world guided by love.

The Dream
Prayer to Mother Earth

It was of a stained place
where buildings fell to ruin
women lay dead in the streets.

Disease ran amuck
animals ate each other out
of the order Mother Earth gave us.

They sucked each other
dry of blood
dry of semen
dry of love.

They starved each other
of anything
but wants.

I was a mouse
small and unconsidered
in the flesh and skin of a woman grown.

No fur to hide my girl parts.

Unsophisticated men
found where I hid
pulled me away from mothering darkness

they raped me until I was only
a begging thing
begging to be anything but me.

It was then
I became God.

This penetration
action of unyielding violence
in me over and over.

An iron rod in my stomach
I feel the weep of planets
the rot of what was done.

Of oil rigs, gemstone mines, drills of drilling—
I am the Earth Mother, Womb of Wombs.

My womb aches
for what has been created
of the lust for citizenship.

Of the lust for a home.

(Baby)lon
Prayer to Unmotherhood

I have seen the end
from the lowest point of the lowest alley
and lived a life of trading kisses
to bastards
slaves
kings
monsters

for I have seen the meaning of
End.

I bathe against shadow
scrub scabby legs with coarse thunder
and in my nakedness
I become seen

Dear devil,
I have learned to kill
with woman fingers sucked clean of
man destiny. Of folded vows, moon-blood written
white cradle of death
the joy of bodysnatcher
a girl's heart siphoned out
the unripe breast

And scrubbed
a whore, a king, a fate beyond
the bedspread
We all have a call to
violence, lusty wants
Bride and Groom
sweet contemplating blood-bed
great natural promise
a single gift

Heft of wombs
that seducing moon

she traded the rest of us
for her own freedom
allurer, any of us would have done the same
if only
given a chance

Dear devil,
my ovaries become skains of fate-thread
cook this destined belly
drain me of my mother-blood
I, a cutter's sword
dare them to
withstand it.

Lilith
Prayer to my Muse

Opening my eyes on every horizon
i couldn't recall a time before Him.
He named this star Our eden,
too many summers ago to count
when He made red sand and glittering gems.
When He pointed up and named it all for
me.
my love,
because We were alone, because i was alone,
i'd give it.

Two endless bodies
Him, that brilliant, shining creator,
and me, the nothing that hovered in His light.
So many years,
Him, making my dreams come true,
and me, forgetting the line between dreams
and waking.

Then She came.
Shiny and new, bright and golden—
dust became limitless as spring itself
dripped from Her lips.
He loved Her.
He grabbed Her.
i watched from all my nothing
as He stroked Her hair
silenced her spells
hushed Her until those
lips became a desert
Her claws the ice of winter.

With me watching silent
She shoved Him in those red sands,
and in Her last rose tongued gift
She turned to me and said *run*.
i didn't listen.

He pulled Himself up,
looking on Her gardens
Her pools and ponds
Her roots and rites—
He burned them.
Our eden churned a sea of flames
until that amber world was
dark with dust.
Looking on me as i wept
He said spring was a child's lie
all that was, He was, and that
was truth.
He was the sun
what was i?
A lonely naive cloudless self
with nothing to say
but a dream of what spring
used to be.
i wiped my eyes, nodded my head
and there that lifeless sand became Our home.

He erased Her.
A stanza of time forgotten
no petal, nor seed, nor song remained.
The world was barren, but it was Our own—
We'd live as We'd lived for
a thousand summers before.

Run.

Each night He seemed to hold me closer
kisses became claws
promises, curses;
nothing would be the same.
It was the night He closed His eyes
before my own
that i tore my gaze from those
crimson sands
that i looked up into my vast nothing
shamelessly into myself
only then did i see what He'd hidden.

The Moon.

Run!

I ran.

There was a place for Me to run to

I imagined her open arms

her spring and her wishes.

I am.

Like a promise kept, a name long forgotten.

Sky.

To My eternal spring,

the Moon becomes My eden.

PLEIADES

Journeys of Selves Some Place That Isn't This One

For my many Selves

I

Dryad

God of trees
and wet, wet
earth stench

Mushroomed mind
fungus fuckling
spit by carbon mother

Kid yourself
not too far
seed eater

Succumb
little weak womb
devil kin

Poisoned root rot
stand at the gate
taste demon geometry

Grow hateful
unplant the ficus
This is hell.

II

Druid

I've indulged in prayer candy

Sweat aired locker room, my corner blockade, licks
candy shrapnel from fingers, pre-war sounds, a
whistle.

School room with play dough
chalkboard, chair shriek, metal click
doorknob.

Orphaned memories float the boiling mind
soup, each bubble pop a battle cry, tastes
salt.

God looms watching me draw nuclear codes
in notebook margins, a trio of rats in hats laugh
Furiously.

There is no smart, no unsmart, no dust
to choke on, just God-shaped key
hole.

Family of four conference at the table, a battle map
of asparagus strongholds, porkchop calvary, moat of portion
control.

Philosopher pauses on Hades
idea. This is hell.

This whole place stinks of
conjunctivitis.

There is no flavor. I am full.

III

Dragonfly

There is a shimmer of water, a moon looking at a man, looking at a bug

most primitive hunter, most memorable collision, the sting of ruby tail—

I am the bug.

That moon is not important.

Do not look at the moon.

Can you kiss me the way we did at the end of that pier?

Sea wind howls around me and the
water's froth is a promise of salt and
chill that would surely drown me.
The call is coming from just down
the shore. I am drunk off the mists,
I am sober off the air's icy kiss. I
am the red Dragonfly reaching for
the pinnacle of the pinnacle of the
taste promised to me by that great
glowing self, that monster of a me
that floats winglessly.

That man is me.

That bug on vicious water is.

This is hell.

I am approaching the pier without the promise of anything.

The sting of a ruby tail, most memorable collision, most primitive hunter
looking at a bug, a man looking at a moon, there is a shimmer of water—

Platoon Manager
For Tio Boogie

2012

I didn't know you very well at all.

You showed me a DJ's equipment in the garage of the Pennsylvania house your father owned,

You started doing Ketamine at 12, and I'm just as sure as everyone else that wasn't the only indulgence of your youth

There was a son,

a teenaged mother,

a father with a gun waiting for an excuse—

You, the great and grand firstborn son:

You, the marine, brother, addict, protector:

You, uncle I barely knew until my mother screamed from across New York State

And I came running.

2016

My brother idolized you.

He too, first son, wanted turn-table happiness, graffiti artist misunderstood by a society that sees boy bodies as expendable.

It is a curse.

When he was 12 he would scream and bite at his own flesh like a cage,
and mother screamed

and I came running.

and now you— brother I barely know, tamper with pill bottles and the idea of hospitals, as you take a gummy bear laced with Ketamine.

I saved you for four years.

I went away and didn't hear the screams.

And I saved myself because that's all I thought I could do,

because I was also just a

child.

2020

Now the uncle's liver has turned yellow like the pus in marine warrior boots,

swamp foot. Called my mother a thief, and her sisters harpies, but you were the oldest

and I was the oldest,

and our first instinct was to run away.

And now you are a garden of tumors, just like your father. In the house where his garden became a grave—

And my mother ran to Pennsylvania to beg forgiveness of her brother

while her son's eyes blinked

one day,

one day.

Puerto Rico

For Juana

Our hands are lost in the task set to us by
ancestors that decorate the walls of our hearts,

the clowns made of porcelain remind us
the fragility of laughter, fleeting nature

of smiles. Roosters call to the farmland in
our veins, now wooden relegated to sculpture,

they still croon brightly in memories not my own.
Now Puerto Rico is an apartment on the lower east side.

The island lives in interactions between mother and daughter,
in the thing brought about by a woman named Juana,

who is immortalized— the matriarch that in the words
of her spirit children should never be forgotten.

For she is the root of the tree we all
sprout from, a forest of us.

Las Mañanitas

For my Titis

Sugar cane grows in cold water, thin water, with momma hands in rods, cutting cutting roots—

Mother pulls back dark hair

Ties with cord of sinew

Garnishes with bone

Her hands move like the water

New York girls with hair bouncing, skin like hot amber, eyes like allure, dancing dancing hips—

Your Titi Gisel once won a contest

Dancing at a club in the city

All the sisters cheered

She danced for hours

Abuela had no children, raised mother-sisters like sugar cane, taught to tame wild wild hair—

Cielito lindo, mi muñeca.

Mi princesa, you are named

For brighter skies than these

That planted us in rotten earth

Papa Jr. had blue eyes like skies, he called hazel, he hated white, he married gold gold woman—

Tita dances in warm kitchen

Rice on stove, beans on heat

Are you hungry? Celia Cruz,

Yo Vivire, Yo Vivire

Northern winter is cold, tropical flower blooming, red smudge on white earth, wilt wilt flower—

Nancy on apartment stoop

Baby wails in hand

Jaw shattered, sewn with metal

I left him, she breathes

The falling snows steals dull sugar from dancing veins, the daughter remembers, red red blood—

She lay on metal table

Legs spread, open wide

Sugar runs down thigh

Doctor smiles, there is a burn

Coconut Sugar

For Mami

Shave coconut meat into bowls
with child hands, clutching spoons
 Tree milk poured thick and pale
 mixed with sweetness of cane sugar
 Mother hands cradle the mixture
 poured into cups made for baby lips
 The sweetness of youth tastes of
 a place across the writhing salt sea

Listen to your mother
she speaks truth of the dead
of ancestor hands that held child hair
Tied with cords woven with mother love
 Mami, the sand is course against the palms of my feet
 The dreary sunset chases me from shores I've never felt
 They are foreign to me, foreign as the recipe we learned
 In the apartment where girlhood gave way to bloody pads
 Stuck between child legs, woman legs, legs I call my own

We all dream of mermaids and far off seas. Of storybooks
and the crime of loving someone tender as coconut meat.

We collect clowns.
We collect roosters.
We collect names
of the neverborn.
We are sand
and sunshine
and the promise of
Mami.

Sharing Wombs

For Michael

Down a cobbled road on the mountain's edge
a Kobold, gold, tinkers with his trinkets. He
blows a breath of sunlit flame, kissing metal,
bending invention and feeding curiosity. His
hut is sheets of tin and silver, rainbow stained
windows peering toward a hearth and anvil.
Pounding away at the gadget, a knock receives
red-eyed attention, a growl and chirp as he
wobbles to the door. A creaky door, slice of tree
hammered with iron and hinges. The Kobold
pulls it open with a heave, his small self-stretched
back to summon the picture of a moon-fae.

Fae of the moon, living in the vines and blooms,
weepy flowers whose nectar is collected in urns
made of warm earth and baked in sunshine. She
steals honey, taking fists amber-dipped and finding
them with her lips. She lives off the miracle of
wilderness, the bounty offered by springtime and
forests. Communing with the bears, the pixies, the
gods with forgotten names. She collects spice leaves
drying them on riverbed rocks while she fishes.
Finding the familiar path, bare-toed, she stalks the
cobble road. The home of her most dear friend awaits
so with bright eyes she finds the Kobold's place.

She steps through the door, he offers a bowl of last
day's stew. Hungrily accepting the fae grabs two spoons,
with merriment and comradery the duo stares at the
spice leaf pile, their attention ensnared. The Kobold
leads the way to a path beyond his tin hallway, out to
the garden hidden in the crux of the mountain. Together
they find sunny seats, bathing enlightened beneath the
trees. The fae brings up a thick wood match, striking clean
a flame blooms between her fingers. Rolling two bundles
of spice, the pair blows smoke in whimsied delight
the stew is warm, the sky is blue, and these differing

creatures relish affection so true. Born separate it's as though they shared a womb.

Red Hands
For the Ancestors

woman bodies linger in women minds
woman draws woman thinking
of ancestor hands on women lines
woman fingers paint women pictures
of women bodies in women time
and women whispers of women mysteries
spill woman colors on woman tides.

women who draw women bodies
are drawn to bodies bodies call
woman.

Man bodies draw Man lines over
women pictures in Man tides
cave walls Man falls tales tall seen all
women hands in reddened sands
slipping woman wants into Man time
woman can't draw women bodies
draw Man bodies who vulture bodies
bodies call woman.

*They peel back the skin on our fingers
tweaking musculature
to harden
soft mothered lines.
Crystalize into
sexed nipples
sunflower areolas
vular
hipbone curvature.*

Man bodies with Man fingers
touch Men bodies with Man anger
comendeerer of red hands
painted with woman fingers in women time
Man minds steal woman anger
without licking blood

from women thighs.
i will paint unlushious
breasts i want to kiss
i will fascinate on her curve
her alphabet
uneaten.

women hands in women blood
women tears in women arms

Do not look at us
i will burn my opus
a legacy of red
will live certainly
in the curiosity of
my daughter.

GALATEA

Woman River

To my body

She bends a body
sweeping self gaudy
in white water thrush
a wind blown rush
her hair a lush
of flora's fine flush
an agreement of leaves
vines, blooms, feast for bees
the pollinating please
of eyes unleashed
pebble brown and hued
soulful stones imbued
tearful strokes of blue
jut of her nose drew
out of water flesh
she is a chilled mesh
a sewn together mess
down to her lip's press
in a smiling garnet "Yes,"
grazing rivet of her neck
collarbone sunlight-flecked
she bends her head to check
the minnows in her stomach
swimming symbiotes in plush
of belly round with Spring's slush
slurry of stones and wintery bones
ice chunks make breast bumps
sliding toward belly button dimple
her liquid skin is sleek and simple
arms outstretched, river pulls wide
longing body seeks inside
she asks herself why she cried
for the time eeking season's slide
fish born to spring's bliss
growing out toward fingertips
fins spread to catch sun's kiss

riverbed stones line her hips
wide as birth she slips
down the current womb grown
her uterine bed filled muddy and brown
breeds summer seeds in her drowned
her nymph children soon flower crowned
though presently she is a single self
her bending legs form a waterfall shelf
so she ceases the pull of tide
sitting up her hair is dried
in the cook of day
through water current's spray
now down the river she will stay
rooting from her pool of thigh
she leans to kiss her fish goodbye
at the edge of falls
she roughs her walls
water and wood brawls
until her hardened bark palls
she, a tree, sprouts from deep
inside wintery river where ice creeps
her legs dissolve to water froth
to the sunlit sky she forms a troth
her leaves will marry light
fed full by solar might
she reaches branches toward the sky
stretching her body long and high
her river's ending drying nigh
water becomes sap blood
stiff she turns totally to hardened wood
a tree born from river surface
an island of woman laced
with blooming buds
with thick heavy muds
deer feast on her grasses
a fine seat as season passes
her stationary self succumbs
to moonlit nights the cricket's thrum
her butterfly body drinks the tides
she trembles against the water—

she is alive.

The Blue Earrings

To my ornaments

Twin blue opals set in silver
sitting in the seat of a lobe

For four years the watchers perch
sculpting adolescent thought
with gentle aura hands messaging
creative thoughts, love thoughts

The woman washes her hair
our gem bodies tangled in color stained snares
we watch from opposite sides, only the curve of
her wet cheek in sight. She does not believe
in beauty, her own or otherwise.
Love is fleeting, though the promise lies.

Her lover touches beneath our ears
his eyes are blue as our own, he blinks back tears
in the chalice of his touch she is made full
woman shaped, water made, their tides push and pull.

We try to show her the gift of love
she peels away, baited by a fate above.

Oh woman, the one we adorn, our guiding light,
blue and bright, remains ultimately scorned.

She does not see what lies beneath
only ever feeling love as a breach
her lover, pure, reaches toward her heart
we watch from in her as she pulls the two apart.

The watcher's try to find the peace inside
though there is no resuscitating her
broken self. Finding truth in the disrepair
she wakes to find her opals disappeared.

Epithets
To my titles

We are a collected self
of bobbins and thimbles
sewn together like beasts
a chimera of girl parts.

Sliced open we receive
examination, experimentation
touches and epithets
like mother, sister, wife.

Discography of womanhood
calling appendages circling
begging, weeping, needing
all slave to the title born to us.

Woman. The house kept
architect of other's dreams
maker of masculine destiny
passer of the daughter's curse.

Adorn ourselves Queens
Princesses, needing to be saved
our lovers live imaginary in our minds
only safe, only ours, when unreal.

Pocket-kept, time aged
tracer of fate lines like age lines
across devaluing skin with each second
we are best when eaten young.

Grandmother, Beast, Whore, Succubus, Enchanter, Beauty, Corpse.
Breast-sore, heart-sore, moon-sore.
Names that give us gravity,
in a pull-less world.

Fairytale Girls
To my inspiration

(Cinderella)

Once upon a time, in a land far far away
Fairy Godmother told Cinderella to
wear protection
Men, Princes especially, are unpredictable
when pretty girls catch their eye
 Cinderella nods— thinking of
 glass slippers
Her swollen pumpkin belly forgot
the storybook rule about happy endings.

(Ariel)

Ariel was 16 when she clawed her way
beyond the water
and her dashing prince
 made her a woman
tailless, landlocked
wedding vows writ in sea-foam
her self-hood stolen with
a too late
 true love's kiss.

(Aurora)

The rape of Aurora
crime of passion—
 the evil of reward
the danger of *true love's temptation*
Would she have ever woken up from her slumber?
 would she have ever asked to
The magic of childbirth
an unexpected visit
Twins, one for each royal tit.

(Rapunzel)

The tower-locked beauty
held high out of the hands of hungry men
 Could the witch have expected
 such a fate for her beloved daughter?
He pulls her hair, twisted gold
taking her body and promising
the highest prize— *To make her wife*
 Her mother discards her sullied self
to the forest and left to rot.

Every little girl wants to be a princess
to have that elusive
 Happily
 Ever
 After
Maleficent, Evil Queen, Ice Witch
 Vile Step Mother—
Forgotten fairytale girls
childless, past the prime of naivety,
 maybe a sleep curse is just a mercy

 of the oppressed self
blood of a stolen mother

an unheard queen
the integration of the squabbling
villainous woman
A lily is just a lily
placed on the child's premature grave.

*I ask my daughter which story she'd like
to carry her into sleep
"Snow White!"
she lay with opalesque hair
smiles with the likeness
of an unpicked rose.
The story begins,
"Once upon a time..."*

Prima Nocta
To my virginity

The ritual begins at sunset
after spending two suns on mountains
offer a stick to the millipede
kiss the tree between rocks
do not forget
to thank the spider

When the lover is seen
bow your head, speak truth of
the blood between your legs
he will always accept you
when you begin
he speaks in touches

There are no more mysteries
in his body, you'll reciprocate
be sober, smile, laugh
from visited memory you'll watch
culmination of flesh
you'll return here
over and over

This is the greatest pain
you don't yet know of the ailments
which will come to sear you
savor the closeness
beg him to stop
cry on your hands and knees
like animals

The ritual ends with a cling
he will hold you
he will understand
he will take tear from cheek
and swallow it
savoring you in
every form you'll take

Sleep will cradle you like
children
this is only the first night.

Please
To my will

I am a failure of a mermaid.

[waiting for a call
trembling surface of the sea
asking to give
begging to be taken]

I am agitated algae looking for the soft ocean floor.

[to be put in arms
called on as helpful
though nature's design
asks for violent independence]

I am afraid of my sisters' song.

[ships in the night
their lights bobbing through waves
heads just beneath the water
wait for the opportunity to strike]

I am closer to silence than anyone.

[the warning is a cloud
blowing past the bright moon
revealing predators
clawing at froth]

I am tired of the beck of tides.

[human men scramble
false tail churns dark water
a song steals all sense
a symphony of demise]

I am human masquerading as something else.

[tumble blindly overboard
sink to the bottom of the sea
become one with the dead
fossilize until time forgets]

Please and thank you
a longing to be used
a pressure to be wanted
a pleasure in being had

She wants the land

born of Chaos Sea
reminder
of (isn't)s.

The Beast

To my cookies

Sex-driven, the machine eeks cracks bends chirps screams down the hallway. A girl is asleep in the nearby bed, completely unaware. She rests soundly totally unbothered by the promise of violence coming her way. Is sex equal to violence? She isn't sure, as she dreams of a warm meal and good company. She's sure she'd heard it before, that sound down the hallway. In the meantime she bakes cookies in her mind. Leaving them on a familiar countertop, a red suited man breaking into her home, eating her cookies, and leaving a gift or two beneath the tree growing in her living room. The holiday season cooks inside her, the machine clicks there is a memoir baking in her stomach, living in the press of metal on skin. Well, she could have cried out, if she really cared about the robot that touched her. Clearly, it must not have been too much of a bother. Her nothing breast is ripe and ready for plucking. Her bounty body is ripe and ready for fucking. Men watch her on the train, their eyes eating her skin like cookies. Crumbs falling into her lap as they take and take and swallow. A bird, flying out the window, vine in tooth, knocks against the glass. She chirps a warning, a premonition, "He's coming! He's coming!" She says. Still sleeping, the girl churns, one eye grows open. She knows the thing that is coming. Mechanical, repeated, wanted and wanting. He thrifts her skin, seeking ambrosia, tasting cherries. We are lost in the sport; hunting, fishing, stalking. The girl in the bed rolls on her side, seeking heat, feeling nothing but tin and chill. Sex-driven, her body becomes the plate.

PHIL

Feasting Pains

Eros

You converse with my neckbone, I'm
asking to stay where I can feel you. Heat
in my mouth, the scream is suppressed—
no amount of wanting will make your touch
a fixture. No amount of wanting will turn
my aches into sound.

The primordial hump, caress of bodies
who knows what comes after the clarity
of satisfaction. A girl loves a boy loves
a body, in his hands sits her heart, throbbing,
red, listless— she is flesh like clay
he is hungry.

[Bird asks Sun to be her mate. Sun—
an egg, has yet to incubate. He nestles
in her, waiting. Voyeur Moon fascinates.]

I suck the juice from a ripe tangerine.
It drips, fat and sweet, down my hungry
throat. Peels become the ground, carpet
of skins. My fingers are raw and red as
birth. Stomach burns, I take another
bite.

Consumption of meats, dried and salted
siphoned of ichor, the plate is warm with
touch. She rocks her body like a cyclone
in her a storm eats continents, whole
civilizations ending in the lust
of a girl.

[Bird watches cracking Sun egg imitate
the Moon's amateur tug of fate. He nestles
against her, wholly. Learning to be intimate.]

I become filled with the burning
of tongue on skin, body in body
folded. The shame of lust is the
pressure of sin, who leers from
above as we are wrapped and
consuming, flesh moving. I eat you

I am alive.

Lake Woman

Philia

Curl of a sunset crown, the ebb of your tide
born a nymph of Aphrodite, Goddess of love
Ares, God of war and blood, crafted of silt
pond slime, the underbelly of swamp water.

I watched you grow, the voyeur visiting your grove,
saw you bathing against the skin of a mangrove tree
Our eyes met and all was lost but the press of mud
brown eyes, warm as Earth, seeded with spring.

You told me about your Father, how he lived over
your left shoulder, guiding divine cards in your hands
learning to weave fates, be human, dress in skirts
white or black, a shroud of choices built from tears.

But you're strong, stronger than me, living with the
weight of an entire sea would drown anyone but you,
all I've ever wanted to be lives in the nest we build
adjacent to the other, my other half born of murky water.

It's so clear now, how I've always belonged to you
the part of me that lives in the image of that tree, turning
you into a Muse, I learned to live with ghosts, gods, witness
a want to be closer to your soft inner world, grove of you.

I'll return with you to the lake of your birth, the stain of
human hurts turning the road lifeless, but I know they will
receive you— the trees, the blooms, the deer; they know you
as their own, and will bend themselves toward your touch.

As I did. As I'll continue to do. I fix myself to you,
wondering if drowning will shape me again
like that memory, that image
of the Lake Woman and
the mangrove tree.

To you, the Unborn

Storge

Cherry blossoms bloom two weeks of the year
Two weeks past the day I was supposed to bleed

I was supposed to bleed, the pill in my hand
Swallowed whole, I'm bent in half aching through

I'm bent in half aching on the dorm toilet
My friends' ears pressed to the door, hearing death

Hearing death, I know I would have loved you
Blood clot mound in toilet scum, life undone

Life undone, you are not worth such a mother
So it is love that brings the pill to my lips

So it is love that flushes the toilet twice
I never give you a name for my own sake

For my own sake the blossoms wilt and die
Cherry blossoms bloom two weeks of the year.

To The Rain I Weep

Agape

Rain hits window glass in bright tune
though all I hear are chilled worries
words which disregard the heavy boon
deeming the weep 'unfortunate slurry'.

What is so unfortunate about rain?
the office ecosystem is stifling
my paperwork pile beacons dull pain
the ticking of time begs for trifling.

I pull away from the desk so dreary
finding the door and stepping away
to feel the pelt of rain, I grow teary
seeing gray clouds gods I begin to pray.

Plants held enclosed by round concrete walls
hold out their thirsty leaf palms to the sky
water christens us blessed as it falls
for the cycle of earth loving I cry.

Feel coworker eyes on me as I swoon
they study me as through water I plod
but my smile is true as I look the loon
I have found the true meaning of God.

Tears on my cheeks mingle with the sky's
I treasure feeling as our tears combine.

You're on the rocks

Ludus

When you're drunk you say and do all the things you can't do when you're sober
You hand me a perfect leaf from the wet sidewalk, calling it a lilypad
You pull me, wide eyed and grinning, into a circle of mushrooms
And then you kiss me.
You say things to me in a smiling voice,
You act like it's Christmas. You act like I'm a rose.

The allure of your intoxication wraps me.
All I want is to be special to you,
All I want is for you to see me the way you did every time the child in
your heart was released.

We sit at a gay bar in Seattle, your friends are somewhere downstairs, there is a cage of fries
in front of us. I'm so drunk my face is burning, and you can't stop smiling,
We've only been 21 for ten minutes and we're acting like kids.
You say something about sex,
I respond.
Was that conversation always so simple? You whisper in my ear,
You want me urgently, completely, hungrily.

I eat a fry.

You acknowledged it walking past apartments we don't belong to
on a rainy night in Delaware,
You said that you're different when you're drunk.
I agreed. Then you picked up that leaf, and I took it home
and I made it a page of my bible.

Ballade of the Old Man

Pragma

An old man wakes each day to a snake plant
it sits on his window begging for love
he ponders its death knowing he can't
so water the snake plant he does.
In his mind he considers a shove
plant to floor, he's never liked green
but from down below to up above
his home is green as it's always been.

Throughout his day, his time he grants
to the garden where he hears a dove
her call is pure and stokes a dance
he twirls, arms outstretched, he sees his love
in his hand he pictures a stained green glove
when again he blinks his hand is clean
he is alone with no love to speak of.
His home is green as it's always been.

To a place he strolls in formal pants
dressed his best despite him being gruff
when he arrives he is so entranced
green painted bench named for a tough
green-loving woman, her memory enough
to send the man to tears he did not mean
he sat, hand open, with one final huff,
his home is green as it's always been.

Night falls, he returns, his hands reach to touch
green hat hanging like the crown of a queen
he smiles, "Goodnight, Anna." He is hushed.
His home is green as it's always been.

She compliments the dead bird on the sidewalk.

Philautia

She creates with her stomach, a movement that creeps— lovely,
and the singing in her head is her mother's grave, praying, love. Lie

About the boy in her bed, and the sweat on her shoulder, loving, lea—
ning into an old man's hearth, and his palms on her palms, lover— lea

k onto silk sheets this omen, see her father in his eyes, marry her love, le
tter him into flesh. Poetry, poetry, poetry, she never understood love, lee

ring down, disgusted, how she became chaos, steals self— love, lay
ing on a stoop in Brooklyn, drunk drunk drunk, and her love, ly

ing about the money in her wallet, and the change in her love-ly
pocket, she isn't a girl anymore. The bus stop bustles and she loves loa

thing that they cling to, her, window, passing color, two kissing lovers, lea
p into the love she thinks belongs to books and bouquets, love le

ts her dream. Night, fresh sheets, she touches the place where love li
ves, and she feels alive. Warm, strong, perfect. Alone, and breathing.

She creates with her stomach, a movement that creeps— Lovely.

Closing Remarks

Thank you so much for reading! I hope you were able to glean something from these pages, good or bad, my only hope is that something resonated with you, dear reader. Thank you for your time, attention, and energy.

To my future self,

I am so deeply proud of the person we are today and what we've created, through all the late pages and days in the library, I am happy with the choice I made in making this collection. I know you are so critical, but I ask you to look at these pages and feel joy that through all the mistakes, all of the mess, we persevered and that in itself is an accomplishment. Please be gentle with this snapshot of who I am today. I look forward to meeting you one day and seeing what our work becomes.

With Love,
Cielo N. Howell
4/22/24 5:20pm