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Rites: Poems

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Rites: Poems

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in English from
The College of William and Mary

by

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Accepted for _____
(Honors, High Honors, Highest Honors)

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Williamsburg, VA
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Invocation, Muse

*“For this beauty,
beauty without strength,
chokes out life” –H.D.*

Invocation

I do not trust my voice
To speak from its molten core.
It cools like fleshy ore
In a human chest.

I am no point of clear quartz
Or wall of unmoving hyacinths
Guarding the greenhouse.
My focus is not mathematical.

I will move this August air
Like water or blood.
My legs cry out to run.

I dig, plunging my hands in soil
To shake the white iris,
Pink peony, blue hydrangea,
To pry open the rose
Until all is red, red, red.

Magian

Cast off the mint leaf, uncut gravel, old dye
In the old rug,
And they become hymnal.

Stone half-circles line the hill.
This is no place for magic
Or deception.

Instead I can weave stems
From a garden—
Like alchemy—
Into a cup of pure metal.

Advice

You tell me I should harden
Into a red brick
Or face of cold marble.

If I am hard,
It is as a silver spoon
In a glass of coffee,
A chesspiece bishop's ivory crown.

Or I bend like the round white head
Of a summer clover.
I am no emperor;
I have no rule over the swaying stems.
If one breaks I will not scream.
If one falls from my hand
It will not hurt me.

The stem is as malleable
As my skin.
It could fall back just as easily as the others,
Each in their ordered place.

Miniature

A face
Not as white
As a sink basin
Or animated as the phantom
Girls in white crepe,
Dancing in May
On the college lawn.

Above the asphalt hill,
A great swath of birds
Spirals above trees and roofs,
Perching, then rising
Like dark seeds shaken
In water.

Parsing

1. Green water in a copper pipe
Where the pressure exceeds the width.
2. A sheet of thin paper
Wet, hanging vertically.
I can't see around it
And it won't dry.
3. Cold precipitated sugar
At the bottom of a glass
That clumps when I tilt it.
4. A synthetic-smelling candle
Thickens the room.
My furiously beating heart.
5. I ask a white dummy for answers.
She follows me in silence,
Denies me water to drink.
Or presses hot lips to my ear,
Repeats a muffled syllable, and, as I try to sleep,
Walks ceaselessly up and down the stairs.

Rose

Bright face watching
Through the shrubbery,
I will uphold you.

Green eyes unblinking
Reflect my shrunken shadow
As I walk past;
Classic lips
Never show teeth.

Red hair
Over your shoulders
Rustles as I near
To reach hands in the hedge,
Pull out the overgrowth.
You barely flinch—

Who are you
Watching unmoving
In the garden?

Myth

A woman
Underwater, holding
A mirror, promising
Chaos when
She surfaces, green eyes
Obscured by gold hair.

The dark lake,
You tell me,
Is desire.
Her bare skin repels
Unless we sit at wooden desks
On tiled floors, or anywhere
Beyond black cliffs
Claiming her as their moral.

Vessel

with the first line of H.D.'s "Magician" no. 5

I instill rest
In a clay urn
With handles,
Bluish glazes
My second and third skins,
Impenetrable.

Venerable woman,
I am the crystal goblet
Heavy in a white hand
And heavier full of water
On a table.

Like a framed Rubens
I am cold,
As you see me.

I move by degrees
In memory,
Or, say, as wind bends
Wild poppies,
Petals blue and red.

Still Life

Tasting plump cherries, having nowhere to go
Is enough to make you feel crazy.

Star anise floating in a cup of tea
Recalls summer afternoons, home from the market,

Hoarding the unsold leftovers:
Tiny packets of madeleines wrapped in cellophane.

Peeling an orange in idleness
Is nothing like that earlier taste

Of orange-scented cake,
Or after-work visions

Of the field's golden aster
Which do not leave
After irresolute sleep.

Botanical

With hawthorn stems, verdure
Of what only a girl can understand,

A walk outside becomes deeper
Than skin.

Bodies, like flowers,
Are always points of analysis;

Flesh can always sacrifice its boundaries
For the picturesque.

What information honeysuckle offers
Is beyond me;

Why I pick it all for myself,
I can't know.

Journey and Transformation

*“And now I
Foam to wheat, a glitter of seas”* –Sylvia Plath

*“O, to blot out this garden
To forget, to find a new beauty
in some terrible
wind-tortured place.”* –H.D.

Humidity

Blue peaks jut into colossal knees
And fall into green.
I kick out my legs.
Summer night, hear me hum—
The dense dew vibrates.
What physics is this
Where the day winds in loops
And thick branches pendulum back?

I am bigger than my body. I loom
Taller than trees. I see myself,
A small white shell
Huddled under grass.
“Who are you?” I ask from my height.
“I can pick you away
With my fingernail.”

My skin flakes off in blue scales
Like shards of mica.
I rise and rise,
Swallowing green hills, expanding like heat
And anything but new.

Reading John Bauer

1. Lena Dances with the Knight

Night air clumps to black.
 If I join my hand with yours, stranger,
 It is not with my fingers.
 You lead me under damp leaves
 In your absurd red pleats,
 Your bizarre sleeves swaying.
 I don't trust the dance you offer.

Brown spots flecked my white shoulders,
 Knees, arms
 When I was young.
 My skin was immediate and personal.

Now my calves harden when I walk upstairs;
 My back tightens with muscle.
 I watch my body move in glass.

Outside, white flowers drop their heads into grass.
 I edge my steps in front of yours
 Beyond the gilded courts, the dances.
 Our strides crystallize—
 I want the upper hand.
 The thick forest freezes.
 Around us dark birds fall like knives.

2. Agneta and the Sea King

Again you show yourself, this time at the back of a church. Everyone kneels with their faces covered. Now I have to look at you, your naked body, your slumped shoulders and hanging head. I can't acknowledge you here, not when we pray. Forget our bodies and legs, but not your hips and our breath and our exacting mouths

3. Still, Tuvstarr sits and gazes down into the water

I see my child's face, my child's breasts
Through unwashed hair.
At twenty one, I can stand from my desk to buy liquor.
My hair is longer, lighter,
My thighs thinner.
In my dream, I am an occupant
Of a terrorized country.
Cloaked children point at me with guns.

I cradle your head on my chest
And fall asleep on the couch.
You carry me on your back
Up the wooden stairs of your parents' house,
Sneak into my guest room,
And kiss me in the safe quiet.

You offer me secrets lumped like ore in your perfect hands
That I will keep.

Opal

Painted onto red paper stars
Are shades of
A white radiator,
Blue painted staircase,
Pink Victorian turret.

My brain yields in stopped time.
Out spirals a paper lantern,
A tunnel blue, now gold.

I crawl through,
Sweeping with my palms
For ephemera—
Sketches, letters—
Spying in the darkness facets
Of a different kind.

Expecting paper,
I pull something
From a crack:

A jewel
Rough, white,
Infinitesimal.
Glinting
As it turns,
Yellow, then blue.

Opiate

I wait
For the stars to swim out
Like most people.
With a cup and book
In either hand,
I am a statue
Holding talismans.

I burn with thirst,
Begin to walk
Beyond the room, window, door
And onto the stone street.

Everyone dances.
Lamps light crowded faces,
Smooth stones
On a long chain.

No one sees me.
I am burning
For water—
I will find it here.

Is it here
Behind long dresses,
Under men's feet?
Is it hidden in trees?

I will find it here:
A stone basin and
The drink it offers.

Garden

Down through
Trampled clover, ragweed,
Pink thistle, rose-pinks,
Green stalks taller than trees are
Footprints,
Heels cut in new mud,
Thick with urgency.

Someone has come before me,
Hurrying to find
The pink border.
Did it break for you?
Did it let you in?

I shield my face
With fingers,
Press an arm
Through petals.
Across, I smell
Acrid ground, dust hurling
Dust as vivid as sleep
And as hurried as vision.

Discovery

In the center of
The daisy field
Is something you left--
I came to find it.

In the jessamine,
The yellow weeds is
A heavy bulb
Dug up like a giant pearl
Or an onion.

When night is blue
And quiet, I panic
From the feel of ghosts.
I kneel, fold my arms
Into my body like petals,
Protect what needs to be protected.

Morning

Drops of silver dew
Line the stone path
And the stone wall.
Crepe myrtles open
Like white stars.

I walk with something
To bury, pressing
My toes in the wet ground
To find where the earth is softest.

There are no vines
To hide behind,
No trees for shelter.

I kneel, scrape up
Soil with cupped hands.
In my palms is a shattered bottle.

Let these shards of glass soften
Under warm earth
Like green pears.

A metal pail
Strikes a metal trough
And rings like an abbey bell.
The early sun's shadows
Are shapes of fathers, sisters.

Crossing

“Empathy is a radical act.” –Sunil Yapa

I.

This is the hot time in spring
 When seedpods fall from trees
 And cracks break
 The red earth.

I know a meeting place
 By the stone wall
 In the orchard
 Where you can jump,
 Where our crouching bodies
 Will not be seen.

Pink blossoms thicken
 To leaves—
 If you run here,
 I will find you.

II.

We will run
 To my old house,
 Lie breathing under
 Floorboards,
 Listen to the others
 Walk above us.

I see no sign
 Of where you jumped.
 The overgrown grass
 Is as if you never came.
 What can I do?
 If I call
 They will find us.
 For someone to help you,
 I pray—

III.

To erase
What you've seen and heard—
The white dust,
The suffocating ash,
The screams.
To undo what brought you here,
To put me back
To where I could still glimpse you
Over the wall,
Instead of in comfort,
In silence,
My shoes untied by the door.

Two Worlds

I find you
Covered in pollen—
Thin arms,
Square jaw,
Cocked chin—
Inhuman girl
Or imp
Dusted in yellow.

You run
Through tall grass,
Covet the unreachable
White weeds,
Ripening strawberries
By your ankles.

You are in control—
You are not cruel—
That tree to you
In the thick
Of the forest
Is a door,
These five violet petals
Five voices
Beckoning me
To follow you
To the other world.

Am I worthy of you?
Your anger,
Your grace,
Your resolve.

Sometimes I can't
See you, yet
It is your song
I hum under the moon.

Exodus

The gold rim
Of your blue eye
Is the border
I want to cross.

I find you
Where it is dark
And damp.
We rest
Under new roots.

The sun is low
For early May—
Thin shadows follow us
And berate us
For leaving
As we walk
Past the blue irises.

Shrouded in leaves
Of ancient oaks
I can no longer hear
Goldfinches singing
Like I used to—

My eyes are wet
As I ask you
To find what's lost.

The Fan District

You know I never do things
By halves.
Late afternoon,
Alone,
I appraise gated yards,
Cars littered
With cherry blossoms
Stalled like honey,
Gilt wheels unspinning.

When we walk here together,
Dreaming of our futures,
I beg for the house
Seeping of money, Georgian,
Brick but no columns,
No lacquer.

Tongue thick in my mouth
From nectared air, I flinch
At a sheet rolled off a
Second-story porch to dry.

It waves in March air.
I can only see it cut in pieces,
Strands of kelp spread from a white hand.

Pastoral

Standing at the field's edge
I turn my face from the wind,
Ask, as spirals of gold hair
Hit my jaw,
When there will be sun.

Midday—
The shadows have lost their sharpness.
A broken stone on the dirt path
Is a grey beetle.
It hurries on stone legs
To avoid my step.

A split branch cracks.
It is as if
My legs silhouetted
Against the fence were different:
A thrush's,
Or better,
A swan's.

Ecstasis

*“Annul the self? I float it,
A day lily in my wine.”* –Lisa Russ Spaar

Cycles Perfecta

Crowd poppies round my temples, deepen the inked line of my jaw, give me ornament. Perhaps now I am part of a Mucha triptych, red, bright, bronzed. To be young is no curse, but I crave old age, and I take my girlish flourishes—bergamot, frankincense, star thistle—with me. To be young is the kind of narcissism I enjoy. Fetishize my voice, distil my image into a green glass eye.

Arabesque

Pressure in lungs and sensing heart and liver stalling, I press palms damp with sweat to the window, heave it open. The night watch begins: among medicinal panic spreads a blue May sky of hammered metal, quivering, struck like a dulcimer. Annihilation is now out of the question: trembling does not repulse me like it used to, now facing the yard as deer vanish into dark trees.

The Givens Bookstore Murals

Here I resume the June Sabbath of teenage years: goldfish pond by the antique train painted red, maps of Virginia in glass cases, Alice with tea by Mrs. Ramsay. In the back, dimmer, old volumes crowd the tallest shelves: A History of England, engraved Longfellow, pocket Dickens. This is one place I cannot abstract—not the blue paint, sweat-stained cotton dress, sense of returning.

Genesis

Kneeling on the dock's edge at the Sweetbriar College boathouse, we peer into opaque water, dark, sun-warmed. Freshwater algae, waterweed, starwort clump to the surface, vanish after revealing themselves. To what biology are we privy when we sink legs in? When can we know where we are, and what grows there?

Creative Evolution

Each day greener than the last—in April I can say what I need to say, become what I need to become. Identities fall and hit one another like dominoes, or, more gracefully, like crowded dandelions bent forward by hot spring wind. This is how the body moves teeth: pressure on the ligament, adding cells of bone to one side, erasing them on the other. Such is the process of the self, changing without ceasing, made only of itself as bone is made only of bone. Ecstasis: now onto the next.