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## Burnt Lavender & Other Remnants

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BURNT LAVENDER & OTHER REMNANTS

by

Danielle Airen Pringle

A THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of

The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of Master of Arts

Major: English

Under the supervision of Professor Grace Bauer

Lincoln, Nebraska

May 2018

## BURNT LAVENDER & OTHER REMNANTS

Danielle Airen Pringle, M.A.

University of Nebraska, 2018

Advisor: Grace L. Bauer

The following is an essay on the craft of poetry. It talks about influences for poetry writing including other poets, history, music, and the poet's personal life, as well as the process of writing poetry throughout the poet's life. The work focuses on how her poetry has developed and what she is trying to accomplish with her poetry in regards to women, power, and desire. The poems are usually persona poems written from the perspectives of medieval women (either real or imagined) and a few of her own personal poems. A sample of some of the poems are included here.

## Table of Contents

Ars Poetica .....	4
Burnt Lavender & Other Remnants.....	19
Guinevere Reminisces.....	21
The Burning.....	22
This Place is Home.....	24
Fall .....	25
Of Love and Lampreys.....	26

## Ars Poetica

### *I. Leaping into the Dark*

I have been in a long-term flirtation with melancholy. Music. Fiction. Poetry. My own writing. As a young girl, I cultivated this affair with the art I consumed. I was in the third grade when I read *A Child Called It*; others were still reading *Captain Underpants*. There is nothing wrong with *Captain Underpants*. I was just more interested in the more complex aspects of life. I know not all poetry has to come from a place of pain or sorrow, a place of confliction, but for me this is the case. I simply cannot write ‘happy’ poems. It is not my style. It never has been.

I remember my first poem, or at least my first good one (definitely not the one my mom has framed in her living room from when I was nine). The poem I am referring to is one I wrote in the sixth grade. We had just learned about the Underground Railroad and I was, to put it in more modern terms, "shook." The idea of these people running for their lives, escaping the harshness of slavery for some semblance of freedom, was heartbreaking.

I wrote a poem about it.

It was a poem about running away. I titled it “Running to Freedom.” So creative, yes. I showed it to my English teacher and she was floored – or, at least, that’s how it appeared to the middle-school me. Her reaction inspired me. Her encouragement inspired me. I typed "poetry" into the search engine on my family computer and found a website that was accepting poetry – poetry.com. Clearly, I was not a well-schooled researcher then. I submitted my poem and I lied to do it. Apparently, eleven-year-olds were too young, so I used my mother’s birthdate. I remember the terror and excitement I experienced when I received a letter with a certificate that said “Editor’s Choice Award.” They wanted me to

read my poem aloud for them, which was obviously not going to happen, so I never responded. I still have that certificate.

This is what brought me here. It made me believe that someone wanted to read what I could write. That someone cared about what I had to say. That I was worth listening to.

Ursula K. Le Guin's protagonist, in the novel *Lavinia*, says, "it's not death that allows us to understand one another, but poetry."<sup>1</sup> I want to understand. I want to understand myself and the people around me, and I want them to understand me in return. Poetry is a sort of reaching out. A grasping for some sense in this world. I am not trying to play the misunderstood artist here, but rather, trying to find a sense of camaraderie with strangers. With the world. If there is just one person who gains something from my writing, then damn it, that's enough for me. Just one person. Poetry allows us to try and understand ourselves and each other. This is where the melancholy comes back in. I am deeply attracted to the darker poetry – the ones that are brimming with turbulent emotion and hammer a screw into your chest. Poems such as the ones Ocean Vuong writes or Sylvia Plath. They deal with topics that tend to lean towards the darker sides of humanity, whether that is destruction, death and war, or inner demons.

I write, but where does this poetry come from? I have no sad tale to tell. No deaths ravaged my life. No one took advantage of me. Plenty of others have lived shorter lives with more tragedy and in much harsher conditions. What, then, gives me the right to speak? I'm a woman, but I'm white. I was never poor, and I was never rich. Yet, in this muddle of mediocrity, within the realm of my unremarkable life, I have felt out of place. I live in a world that fits poorly on my shoulders. It makes me sag, sway, trip over nothing. I have not felt a sense of belonging, a place for my soul to reside, and I constantly find myself trying on

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<sup>1</sup> Ursula K. Le Guin, *Lavinia* (Orlando: Harcourt, 2008), 5.

masks, trying to find some sort of purchase. Do I conform to the roles of a woman, or do I break them? Maybe I want to be both. This internal struggle comes to light in the some of the personal poems I write.

*I am not a flower / but I want to be, / and I also / don't.*

I suspect that I have never experienced my true self—whatever that means. There are parts constantly at war, clawing over each other to break the surface, until another rises and takes over. I have tried on many masks: the bastard, the victim, the sinner, the warrior, the oppressor, the justiciar, the torturer, the lover. I am the imposter. Perhaps not to deceive others but to deceive myself. Through all this, I have found that each poem is a place for reinvention, for discovery.

*Maybe I'm a tree – a / pine. I'm always pining.*

I find in poetry a space of utter blankness and possibility. I can become someone else. Step into their robes and discover a place of belonging, a place of grounding. I can be a flower, a tree, a tangle of ivy, or even burning lavender. Within this person, during this possession, I feel whole. The thoughts are not my own and, wrapped in the skin of this new being, I find a place of belonging – at least until the words run out. My own unraveled strands – the silk of my soul – are bound for a moment; connected and whole.

## *II. The Paths that Brought Me Here*

At a small one-floor ranch house in Lincoln, Nebraska, I lived my formative years. I remember the azalea bushes my mother planted. The prickly, burning bushes that everyone else had, despite how truly terrible they are. I remember when my sisters were born and I was moved into a small room with just enough space to fit my new twin bed snugly in one corner of the room where I also piled my books. There was a hole in the wall, from when

my mother got mad and threw my unicorn statuette into the dry wall. I covered it with a poster. I hid in that room when my mom was crying. I hid in that room to hide my own tears when her boyfriend squeezed my shoulders to the point of pain and smiled – I knew if I let either of them see, I would get in trouble.

I sought out friends and made some, but others looked at me and said I was a bastard. That I was going to hell. Second graders can be so brutally honest, or rude, depending on your point of view. That same year I started making my own school lunches. I had to. My mother was not allowed to do it for me anymore—so said her boyfriend. So, I started making myself peanut butter and jelly sandwiches every day. It was all I knew how to make then. It has been years, over a decade, and I still cannot bring myself to eat a peanut butter and jelly sandwich today.

*This is growing up, / I thought. You make sandwiches / and eat the crust.*

I would visit my father, who was trying to get me to follow his faith, but they didn't believe animals went to heaven. I decided that was no heaven for me. I resented sitting in the church pew, the smell of old floral perfume and smoky incense burning my nose as everyone else bowed their heads, waiting in line for that sacred wafer. Kids younger than myself were waiting, but I was not allowed to partake. Catholicism is strict; their dictums are clear. And I am a bastard. Still, I was still upset about it. What kind of god refuses to let animals into heaven and makes you feel like an outcast in a place purported to be a sanctuary? I said my Hail Marys with a dry taste in my mouth, mumbling through it so I could eat dinner.

*she was the only person left / in the rows... / This was a ritual*

My mother and her boyfriend moved us. I was in seventh grade, so this was after my first brief flirtation with poetry. The half-hour drive from Lincoln took me to a place I never

thought I would find myself: a farmhouse away from the city, away from my friends. I had to change schools just as middle school was beginning. I was the new girl. On top of that, I had just gotten braces, so now I was the dorky new girl. I remember skipping lunches and reading instead. When I got home, I was the butt of the jokes. My sisters would laugh and point in unison – they are twins. I hid in my room in the basement. I found solace in the walk-in closet among the piles of clothes and the shoes carelessly kicked off.

*Mom, / I still cover my mouth / when I eat.*

I made friends with another outcast. She showed me things I probably should not have known at the age of thirteen. She would turn on pornography. Talk about all the boys she had been with. I was embarrassed, appalled, and in awe. She was an uncomfortable idol, but I wanted to be like her. I wanted that confidence – to be seen or heard. I lied so that the two of us could get picked up by a boy. He was eighteen. I remember his house reeked. I now know that it was some rather dank-smelling weed. He asked if we were going to do a threesome. My new friend immediately said that I was too much of a prude, and I looked at the floor. I knew my face was so goddamn red; I could feel it. I did not know what a threesome was. He shrugged, and the two of them moved to his bed. He had a spaniel. I pet the dog and squeezed my nose shut from the smell of weed, ignoring what was going on behind me. I remember being uncomfortable, trying to find a comfortable position. Totally out of touch with my own sexuality. I thought myself an innocent. Soon after, we were no longer friends. But I still think of her, sometimes. I guess I have always been drawn in by females who do what they want while I sit on the couch, unmoved. During this period, I wrote no poetry. I was too caught up in my own thirteen-year-old angst to delve into any writing. (It should also be noted that I do not remember taking any history classes in my late

middle school career, and it is from history where most of my poetry arises.) Eventually, I got back into poetry – really shitty and angsty poetry, mind you – when I was in high school.

*But I want my / own place, wild and uncultivated.*

I moved in with my grandma when I was fifteen. After thirteen years, I could not handle being a joke in my own home. I was listening to music where people screamed, music that talked about death and suicide. My clothes were tight and dark, long-sleeve to cover the marks where I scraped metal against my skin hard, but not hard enough to break the skin. It was just enough to turn the lines into welts. I wanted control. I wanted to feel something other than the pain in my chest. But I was not strong enough to see my own blood.

I was even an imposter at being depressed. The poems I wrote were your typical, “the world is dark / everything is dark / this is where I am at home,” or something like that. The poems were a tangled mess of unbridled emotions with no clear direction. I had no direction.

I clung to others for some sort of purchase, some way to anchor myself in this world – which meant I was a clingy girlfriend. And even when they would literally push me away, I would always apologize and beg. I wanted to be worthy. I needed someone to find value in me, because I couldn’t see the value myself. And when they left, which of course they did, I only became more desperate.

This is perhaps most evident in my poem “Eurydice Undone,” which I completed years ago. It is clearly influenced by previous relationships. In this poem, I play with the old myth of Orpheus and Eurydice to showcase my own failings in relationships.

*I squeezed / until every last utterance / was ripped from your throat.*

I do not have many personal poems now. I fear that I become too whiny, or that I am falling back into the teenage angst with black hair and fake lip rings. That is a place I

would rather not go back to. So, while I am interested in looking at mental states, raw emotion, there is the risk of being uninteresting and mediocre. Of earning sympathy rather than empathy. Kim Addonizio nails the root of the problem on the head when she says, “When you explore your own life in poetry, it’s useful to remember that nobody really cares...If you want a reader’s attention, you’ve got to be interesting.”<sup>2</sup> Personally, I do not find that there is anything particularly interesting about my life, certainly not anything worth writing poems about – hence why I have kept the personal poems at a distance. What could I possibly have to say that would be different from other poems written during teenage years? Every life has its own hardships and trials, so my own story seems unremarkable and, perhaps, even typical. Richard Hugo, however, changed my mind when I read: “*How you feel about yourself* is probably the most important feeling you have. It colors all other feelings, and if you are a poet, it colors your writing. It may account for your writing.”<sup>3</sup> Even when I am not writing personal poems, my poetry is influenced by my past, by my journey thus far. Every instance of inadequacy, of sadness, of heartbreak and thoughts of monstrosity – this all affects my writing.

*I would never drown for you, / slip off my dress, the waves / lacing up my neck, the foam a delicate froth*

All the instances I have showcased previously have led me to certain feelings and thoughts about myself. Even when I am putting on a mask, being an imposter to write, a bit of myself and how I feel about myself sneaks its way into the poems. It is inescapable, because “Art is a creative response to life. Pain and suffering are part of life...The world is full of misery, but we have the responsibility not to create more misery.”<sup>4</sup> So, while my writing stems from a place of melancholic musing and often is not happy, I would not say it

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<sup>2</sup> Kim Addonizio, *Ordinary Genius* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2009), 127.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Hugo, *The Triggering Town* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1979), 67.

<sup>4</sup> Addonizio, 149.

induces misery but, rather, a sense of camaraderie. When I read – fiction or poetry – I am hoping to find that I am not alone in my feelings, in my life. Ocean Vuong, Anne Sexton, Rita Dove, and Chaucer are just a few poets that make me feel less alone, that make me really *feel* and *think*. These poets inspire me to write. Even if they are talking about things far removed from myself, like how some of Vuong’s poetry is about Vietnam, but the feelings of desire, loss, violence, and transformation are still accessible in the poetry. Even though our lives are so different, there are common strands to grasp onto and that can be woven throughout the poems. This is what I hope to achieve – some sort of connection, a common space for expression and thought. I hope my poetry reaches people, like music. Poetry is a sort of music in its own way. Poets play with words the way musicians play with chords and notes, and the only way to get better is with practice, of course.

*Leech the lyrics / from my being, help me give / a melody for my beloved haunTERS.*

When I went to college, my poetry really took off. I was more exposed. I was around people who enjoyed similar hobbies. I learned so many new things and was on a new path all my own. I took an intermediate poetry class in my undergrad with Marianne Kunkel. It was in her class that I developed confidence in my own writing, that I could actually write decent poetry and not simply pour emotions onto the page in an arrangement that vaguely resembles a poem. She was encouraging and challenging. She inspired me to write more. I would not be getting a graduate degree in poetry if not for her guidance. I would be scribbling in notebooks and keeping my poetry to myself, which would have been detrimental to my craft. Being surrounded, supported, and challenged by other writers with a similar goal – to write better – has been a huge force in the development of my poetry. They say it takes a village to raise a child. The same is true with a writer. But in the case of the writer, the village is other writers – either interactions with actual people or reading.

### *III. Agent Acquisition: Where Have All the Women Gone?*

What has been most influential to my poetic career was my discovery of a medieval history class. I took it on a whim because a role model of mine (a powerful woman a few years older than myself) said I might enjoy it. As it turned out, I was enraptured, obsessed. There were women who divorced one king for another and women who ruled without a king at all. These women did remarkable things. They were strong while I was not. I let myself be ruled – by my parents, by my sisters, my peers, my own thoughts. I was drawn in by these ancient queens. I needed to learn more, to know more about their lives. Tony Hoagland said, “The poet with an obsession never has to search for subject matter. It is always right there, welling up like an Artesian spring.”<sup>5</sup> I had discovered my obsession. I was appalled that I had not known about them before. While I agree with Hoagland, I still do a fair amount of searching. I search for more women, for more information to uncover and expose. I want to unearth these women.

*Pull the voices / of these women, / the timbre of their desires / – my own desires – from / the marrow of my  
bones*

Music and history are my main sources of inspiration – they are things that move me to write. Poetry tends to highlight the musicality of language. I learn about these women and then labor to give them a voice. I lend them myself. I write persona poems. I become these women, or they become me. It is hard to tell if I slip into their skin or if they slip into mine. Each persona is different and yet still has a part of me. My own colors seep through onto the page. Addonizio says, “The truth is, you will be in your work with or without an obvious

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<sup>5</sup> Tony Hoagland, *Real Sofistikashun* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2006), 81.

persona.”<sup>6</sup> I have only recently begun writing my own personal poems seriously; otherwise, I write in the voices of other women. I have found that I “speak best through the voice of another person. This then becomes most truly [my] own voice.”<sup>7</sup> At least that is what John Drury says in his book on craft and I find myself obliged to agree, however I think I’m still trying to discover my own voice buried underneath the personas I put on. I try on different voices, become these women for the duration of the poem. Different voices like so many masks. I research them, their lives, and then the words come out.

*You are in / my domain, the castle, the wealth / of my lands. I am master and mistress / and you have  
chosen to come here.*

I think the most evident part of my use of persona comes through in the writing process, the raw writing before revision. I have the facts, the research in the foreground of my mind and, sometimes, they slip through when, really, the person would not know this yet. Sometimes I give away too much information. When I realize this, I immediately back up and then go in the opposite direction, where I do not give enough information. It is a balancing act – and a tough one at that. Poetry workshops have tempered this issue, though, at least somewhat. My fellow poets have told me when the writing is not clear or when the voice goes beyond what they should know. It is easy to forget that many people know little of the women I am writing about.

This, now, is the reason I write about them. These women should be known. They should be celebrated, or, at the very least, heard.

I wouldn’t know about them had I not taken classes or done reading of my own. I had to search for these women. How many women have been pushed to the wayside in

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<sup>6</sup> Addonizio, 134.

<sup>7</sup> John Drury, *Creating Poetry* (Cincinnati: Writer’s Digest Books, 1991), 137.

history, literature, life? This is still happening today, in 2018. There are movements and marches. Even in literature, women writers are slowly being brought into the canon. However, as I was looking through the poetic craft section in the library recently, I saw mostly male names. There was only a soft sprinkling of women. Are women not writing craft books? Or, are they not being given adequate space? Even in this essay, I am quoting more men than women. Perhaps I simply was not looking in the right place, but it seems like craft books written by women should be readily available. These are questions that haunt me and make me burn. And I burn to write more, to carve out a space.

*Beware the woman / she may just grab and pull, / sink her teeth in.*

I see my own poetry as contributing to bringing these women back into the light, even I am failing somewhat. I write about “powerful” women. About queens. About witches. Where are the poems about the girls who worked all their lives? The ones who died in childbirth? The ones who became nuns? The women of color? I have not written about them, and yet their voices are just as valid as the queens who are in my poems. Perhaps that will be the next set of poems, but this is still a failing I see in my own work as it stands currently. As poets, “we have the obligation to make real poems, to contribute to the living, evolving heritage of poetry.”<sup>8</sup> I have an obligation to these women, not just to the queens and duchesses, to the women who ‘behaved badly’ or were wronged, but to the women who lived unremarkably for history, but remarkably for me. It is long past time to resurrect these women from the attics they have been pushed into. I will put on a mask, let them speak through me – let us speak together and become legion. Together, we can have power.

#### *IV. Weapons of Choice: Poetic Tools*

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<sup>8</sup> Hoagland, 67.

Even though most of my poems are personas of women from the past, the poems do not take the forms of past poetry. By this, I mean my poems are free verse lyric poetry. Mary Oliver says, the “lyric poem is brief, concentrated, has usually no more than a single subject and focus and no more than a single voice.”<sup>9</sup> By brief, she means sixty lines or less, which is typical of many poems. However, I rarely write long poems. Mine are brief instances, glimpses in time. Particularly with writing historical persona poems, I find it can be dangerous to make the poem too long. I am prone to delve into details that the persona would not know at a certain point in time, making them omniscient and, thus, making the reader question the validity and reality of the poem. So, almost all of my poems are lyric poems. Hence why, at the beginning of my collection, I invoke Erato, the Greek muse of lyric poetry. This is also to allude to the practice of invoking some spirit, which was a practice of many medieval writers. It also serves to set up the themes of the collection, which has to do with women, power, and love, as well as bringing in recurring images, such as burning and lavender.

*Lady / of ruin, lady of lyric, / pull from me the words.*

I use free verse poems. Only one is a definite, metered form, and even that one is loosely following the guidelines of metered poetry. I have no ear for meter. I am one of many people “who did not enjoy such early experiences with meter and rhyme [and] have to study prosody as though it were a foreign language,” which I am normally good at, but not in this case.<sup>10</sup> I tried to write a sonnet, and I failed. I put my hand under my chin and said the words aloud, but everything felt the same. Maybe I was not annunciating enough, but I could not feel or hear the iambics. The only traditional form I did write in was the sestina. I

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<sup>9</sup> Mary Oliver, *A Poetry Handbook* (Orlando: Harcourt, 1994), 84.

<sup>10</sup> Oliver, 14.

chose it for the poem “Joan I of Navarre to her baby Isabella.” It is a persona poem, written from the perspective of Joan, a mother who lost two of her daughters a year before the birth of Isabella in 1295. She was queen to a French king. The sestina is a form born of troubadours and the earliest known examples were written by Arnaut Daniel, a twelfth century troubadour, in Provencal.<sup>11</sup> Utilizing this form was thus a way to articulate a mother’s obsession and plea for her only daughter to survive while also calling upon a form that would have been popular during the actual historical period. This was one of my more ambitious and probably the longest poem I have ever written. Even the diction in this piece is a bit dated and not as modern as my other poems. She is praying, asking for God to watch over her little girl.

*men will try to turn you into a flower. / I pray you grow stronger, that you thrive, survive / and don't let  
death find you until you are ready.*

My other poems’ diction is more modernized and familiar to a reading audience now. So, even though these women are from centuries ago, they are imbued with a bit of myself to bring about a modern rendition of their voices. I am talking about the voices of Guinevere, Isabella of France, Elizabeth Bathory, women accused of witchcraft, of the women sculpted into being. It is a dance of power and desire. Eros is laden within the poems. The thoughts of these women (and some men). I frequently use fragments (*They burnt it, you see. / Torched it, / burnt away all trace / of her*). It replicates the “connective resourcefulness of the human mind and the myriad simultaneous complexities of experience. It walks between orientation and disorientation...the techniques by which authenticity and energy is certified.”<sup>12</sup> These women who appear in the collection were real people, with real

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<sup>11</sup> Drury, 120.

<sup>12</sup> Hoagland, 160.

desires, and complexities. They are imbued with my own as well. As the women are seen to be speaking for themselves in the first person, their thoughts are not linear. They jump. They repeat (*I would never burn for you...I would never drown for you...I would never bleed for you...*). They obsess and drift off. The poems seek to replicate the streams of thoughts and desires latent in people. That does not mean there is not any craft. There is assonance, alliteration, a focus on the musicality of the language and on the emphasis of line breaks. There is internal rhyme, slant rhyme, but I stay away from end rhyme. One has to be very clever and good at end rhymes or else they become like nursery rhymes or Dr. Seuss, which is not what I am trying to achieve. I want these women to be brought to life, to be heard. So, I try to make them as real as possible, as if they are speaking directly to the reader.

*I tried to turn you / into a sonnet, / the crumpled flurries / in the corner are proof*

I may not be a formalist, but my poems do have some form. The appearance on the page is just as important as the way they sound. The blank space is a canvas for the words, for the images to play upon, or for the notes to take flight. I have a few poems that experiment with blank space. The words are scattered over the page like petals, or leaves – guiding the eye from one place to another, to take a breath in between the words. This is true of the poem “Fall” and “Mutually Exclusive,” both of which deal with plants in some way and seek to replicate a scattering of thoughts as well as the natural formations of the greenery. Other poems are broken into stanzas of couplets, tercets, or quatrains, or they are simply one long stanza with no breaks. It was in workshop that I realized how important the shape of a poem is. Some poems want to be couplets, others want to be quatrains and so on. One colleague in particular was especially adept at discovering what form suited each poem best. I confess I am not on her level, but I try to put the poems in forms that make sense with the language and the tonality of the piece. Aside from the shape of the poem, the one

last thing I really focus on is the language of the poem. This probably seems self-explanatory, but I try to ground my poems in concrete images rather than the abstract. I pay particular attention to the sense of touch and taste. Hands, burning, hair, and eyes are images that recur in my poems. I did not notice until I started putting them all together. These parts of the body are most important in my poems and coincidentally (or, perhaps not) correspond to how many past poets write about women in love poems. My poems, however, are usually describing men in these terms – so it becomes a sort of reversal. Burning and coldness are also images usually used in describing Eros, or desire. Since desire plays a rather large role in my poetry, this makes sense. I have read the so-called masters, the men who wrote love poems and sonnets, and I have repurposed them for my own uses. Reading informs my poetry. History informs my poetry. I have learned from those who have come before me and I will use their tools as my own weapons, weapons to carve a place for these women, for myself.

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# Burnt Lavender & Other Remnants



my eyes are always hungry  
and remembering  
however the image enters  
and its force remains

---

-“Afterimages”

by Audre Lorde

---



## Guinevere Reminisces

Of course, I loved him.  
Not because he had a royal  
name, arms strong as trees,

or a country at his back.  
It was his eyes. They always looked  
like still water.

And even when he was standing  
with his knights,  
he was looking elsewhere.

He covered it with words,  
a smile that didn't move past his lips,  
and I wanted to find a way

to get those eyes  
to look at me. One day,  
he let me hold his blistered hands.

I called to him,  
touched his cheek,  
but his eyes stayed

distant, and I shrunk  
in the absence of his gaze.  
I was left in the castle

while he was tending  
the curves of Albion  
more and more.

Now, even as he's back,  
sitting nobly on his throne  
and I am beside him,

I can't tell you the color of his eyes.

The Burning

My hands are bound,  
forcing the pole tight  
against my back, shoved  
between the blades of my shoulders.

Bundles of straw  
and thin branches  
are stacked around me,  
a fortress of offerings.

I focus on filling  
and emptying my lungs –  
the sulfur smeared  
on my dress, pungent –

trying to ignore the observers,  
the voyeurs wetting  
cracked lips  
in anticipation.

The worst part  
is the waiting.  
Waiting for the flames  
to take a firm hold,

to tear through my clothes,  
ravage my skin, layer after layer,  
weeping vermilion  
and then charred black,

waiting for release.  
And I can't keep my promise.  
Voice pulling from throat,  
I scream.

And the audience smiles,  
like I knew they would.



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.

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-“Diving into the Wreck”

by Adrienne Rich

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## This Place is Home

My grandma dried flowers  
in her shop. It was full  
of antiques – walnut chairs, crisp  
linen dresses, and cigar smoke  
that had soaked into the old walls  
over the years. I loved the shop, with  
its large paned windows and sloping  
floor. My childhood was spent in these remnants  
of the past, among fake pussy willows and  
teddy bears. I even got to make my own  
displays, arrange doilies and tea cups.  
Furniture would sell, trinkets  
would change, but there was always  
the flowers. The dried baby's breath  
and lavender – there was so much light,  
so many dusty windows and everything  
was in a golden haze.

Fall

I take out the broom you forgot,  
 brushing away crisp leaves  
 from the drive.  
 An endless chore  
 because the trees have more to give.  
 I fall into repetition,  
 when a gust  
 blows the leaves in disarray  
 and they blunder back.  
 I pause for a breath, the breeze cool  
 against my cheek  
 and it feels like you.  
 Then, I get the rake.

## Of Love and Lampreys

At night,  
listening as you steadily pump  
carbon dioxide into the room,  
I can feel them.  
Their cylindrical bodies  
wriggling and writhing beneath my breast.  
I grope after them, trying to wrench them free,  
but their fangs are latched on  
like a brand new Bandaid,  
and they're slippery like your kisses  
after too much whiskey and coke.  
Your arm flops over me, then stirs possessively,  
pressing my shoulders into your chest  
and another nine-eyed fiend bores into my skin.  
Your lips bombard my neck, journey upwards.  
The lampreys suck on my aorta,  
you on my ear.  
They deflate the valves  
and my breaths  
burn in my lungs.  
You shift back into sleep,  
nose burrowed in my hair,  
like you don't know  
you're draining me.