A VIRTUOUS WOMAN

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A VIRTUOUS WOMAN

A

THESIS

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Abstract

*A Virtuous Woman* is simultaneously the story of one woman and the story of all women. It is an attempt to discover the true nature of virtue, especially as it applies to women. The poems consider what it means to be good and what it means to be a woman, questions for which there are no clear answers. For that reason a variety of women appear in the collection, and they speak openly about a range subjects: violence, desire, anger, family history, grief, the functions and failings of their own bodies. The poems likewise employ a variety of forms. Some are short and tight, designed to surprise with their content and language. Others are long and expansive, and attempt to consider a single subject from multiple angles. Finally, there are those that lack defined form which are meant to emulate the workings of the human brain.

The collection is organized into three unnamed parts that can be read as the story of one woman’s journey of self discovery: a rash and tragic love affair, back story about the woman’s family and childhood, and finally how she comes to terms with her body and her self.
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Show me your nothing
that you’ve left behind
and I’ll build from it a forest and a highway,
an airport, baseness, tenderness,
a missing home.

-Wisława Szymborska
To build a house

A foundation must be poured.
Timber must be cut to size.
There are blue prints to follow,
or not, and any number of experts
to consult.

A house is a shell until you
have filled it, with kitchenware,
books, furniture: the most
essential things. Until life
is there, it is only a model

of possibility. A house cannot
be built in a day. Some take
years to construct and some,
are never finished.

To build a house
is the slow progression
of my hand to your hand,
of your lips to my lips,
of two parts, making one.
She had lived, we'll say,
A harmless life, she called a virtuous life,
A quiet life, which was not life at all

-Elizabeth Barrett Browning
Fuel

I didn’t know I would love wood, hauling and chopping and stacking. I didn’t know it would make me feel useful and independent and strong. But I do and it does and every time my maul slides through a round smooth as if it were butter I make a conquest. People keep saying I need a man to haul and chop and stack my wood, but the wood doesn’t say that. It doesn’t tell me I’m wrong or that it’s not okay to be with myself. Sometimes when it’s 50 below and I want to curl into a quilt by my fire, I imagine there could be room for a man, a body to labor at my expense, but then this wood would stop being mine, this house would stop being mine, this body would stop being mine.
Cooking Cuban

This meal was not intended for you. It was my hope the cumin, garlic,
and ginger would be strong enough to resurrect the dead. I imagined
seared pork tenderloins served on a bed of spinach would stimulate dormant
brain cells, pink grapefruit coleslaw would roll over the tongue, enliven the taste
buds. I knew cinnamon bananas soaked in rum would carve a path straight through
the withered arteries to the heart. I saw each bite giving a little
more life, until he was like Cuba, hot and volatile, ready to take
on the world. He did not rise, refused to even make an appearance. Let
me tell you, tears will not persuade dead men, nor can he be moved with begging
or bribery. I was surrounded by an island of food with no one
to feed. I imagined it rotting and stinking until my house crumbled,
leaving me huddled in the ruins, spatula in hand. But today when
I opened my window, there you were, an infant, shiny and new. My just
polished flatware and freshly washed plates are useless now; you imagine this

is how I have always been. To be honest, you are so new it frightens me. The trust in your face cannot last; you might break in my arms or choke on my food. Mostly, I fear that after we eat, you will turn to me and say,

"Sorry, wrong window."
This I know for sure

It is easier to remember why we left than why we came. The same applies to lovers. Memory has a way of skewing reality. Sophists believed reality is relative.

Every fall the high bush cranberries around my house begin their decay. The first year when it happened I was shocked by the familiar smell of rancid dying.

One night this summer two ex-lovers approached me and apologized for their failings, each on his own, without knowledge of the other. They were looking for closure.

According to Webster’s “close” is “to fill up or stop; to finish; to come to an end; to shut or stop entirely”. I’m not convinced this can ever happen between two people.

I believed I had no addictions until I made a list, rating every ex-lover, and saw that the tally fell more in the “bad” column than the “good”. Mathematics does not lie.

You were not on my radar. You came at me from the periphery, like a shadow across the kitchen at dusk, cutting down the glare of all the knives laid out on the counter.

After my last birthday I made a list of fifteen traits I wanted in a lover. I only really needed five. The only thing you don’t do is dance, but you’ve said you’ll learn.

I can feel you in bed, even when we are not touching. I can tell by your breathing when you are really asleep and when you are waiting for me to breathe.

The first time we made love and I said “thank you” I was really talking to God, but you answered anyway. Now you say it all the time too, and you do not believe in God.
The Harvest

Your hands are mine. I cut, following the neat line that marks the start of your wrists while you slept. Your hair is mine too. I pulled it out strand by strand last Tuesday while you sat believing

I was trimming dead ends, and your back fell victim to my paring knife when we danced drunk and shirtless. My pieces of you are laid out on my kitchen table in their proper places. They are starting to take your shape. Sometimes late at night I sit with them, drink a cup of tea and talk about my day. They are good listeners. Soon I will claim your thighs, forearms, and feet. After your chest is in place I’ll use it for a pillow when I sleep. The last part Your hands draw back, your tongue loves omission but those brown spheres that follow me through the room are honest. I will keep them beside my bed. In the morning they will be the first thing I see and when nightmares plague me, I’ll sleep knowing you are there, seeing me.
The Good Cook

What you called pot roast
was actually my left calf
muscle slow cooked in Southern
Comfort and cayenne pepper
and the soup you licked
out with finger and face
was seasoned by my tears
You call me the good cook
as if it will keep me
mute and I feed you
my body piece meal
as if eating and loving
can interchange. If we are
what we eat, are you doomed
to become me? Your eyes
are small-greedy, teeth
huge-white. Would you like
my breasts, pan-fried or
oven-baked? Can I drain
my blood for you? It's red-
hot, with a hint of smoke
and I'm sure it will complement
my batter-dipped tongue.
What can I say to make you understand
that sometimes kindness just isn’t enough?
You will ask how I could leave a tender
man for a hard one, exchange making love
for fucking, let him call me slut
instead of darling. What words can describe
how it feels to have a man who only
touches you in bed, after dark, every
curtain drawn? The contrast to that is like
setting your skin on fire, watching it
blister, doing nothing to cool the burn.
When this happens and you have been treading
stagnant water for far too long, heat is
relief, its bearer a savior of sorts.
My Left Arm on the Mantle

You said “I’m not being sadistic,” when you asked if you could have my arm. “I want to put it on the mantle,” you said, “I think it will tie the room together.” When I started to say no you said, “If you really love me you’ll give it up. Besides, I only want the left and you don’t use that one as much.” I let you lead me to the garage and I didn’t complain when you used the buss saw to cut half-way between my shoulders and elbow. I had to smile when you grinned and exclaimed, “What a fine specimen!” That night you packed my left arm in ice and put iodine on my stub. In the morning you put my left arm on the mantle and for three days it was beautiful. You were right. It did tie the room together. On the fourth day it began to smell and I was certain I saw a maggot or two when I was dusting. So we took my left arm and had it dipped in bronze like a pair of baby shoes. I was surprised when the bronze man greeted you by name but you said he was just an old friend of your father’s. It took some weeks but I learned to live without my left arm. I even told you that I did not really miss it. I bought shoes with Velcro straps and cut my hair short for easy cleaning. At dinner you sliced my food into baby sized pieces and fed them to me one by one. When we had sex you rubbed my stub with your free hand because you said it reminded you of my love. For Christmas you hung our stockings from my left arm and I had to admit, it did look very festive. You gave me a coat with only one arm and helped
me learn how to do up the buttons with just my right hand. On New Year’s Eve your brother got drunk and ran around the house hitting our guests with my left arm. I asked you to make him stop, but I don’t think you heard me. I finally got it back from him close to midnight. When the ball dropped on the T.V. we stood together, you and I, with my left arm held in between like some kind of family. After that night you stopped rubbing my stub but I didn’t mind because my ghost arm still remembered your touch. Some afternoons I saw you standing in the living room staring at my left arm on the mantle. When we went out I’d watch you and see you looking at the arms of other women and I would wonder how you thought they would look on our mantle. In the spring we cleaned house and you put my left arm in the hall closet.

When I asked you why, you said you were tired of it and maybe we should find another mantle piece. I didn’t know how to feel but I did enjoy your expression when I asked how you felt about giving up a leg.
Remorse

It is the price of speculation, and I am flattening out my hand on the burner of the stove because some things cannot be reined in by words.

This is more prayer than crime. Three days ago you told me we are leaving, said this with so much joy I cannot bear to let regret fill me, no matter how hollow I feel.

How do you measure the loss of what you did not know you wanted as you watch it leave? The bread truck passing as you walk the city, broke and hungry.

Washing my hair in the sink is as close to God as I can get at the moment, the warm water trickling like divinity from the tea kettle down my neck.

If cleanliness is next to godliness and that is next to holiness, aren’t I working my way up some ladder toward my next incarnation? How will I know when I’m there?

In 2nd grade I wanted to be president, later a vet, later a naturalist, later something else. Now I find myself walking in circles wearing a uniform labeled “what if”.

My mother likes to discuss my sister’s potential: her beauty, her brains, her way with languages and people. These conversations are no longer in present tense.

I spoke with a friend today who just broke up with her girlfriend. They are trying to be friends. I don’t understand this phenomenon. Shouldn’t some things be allowed to die?

When my dog became too weak to walk and she put him to sleep, I got the call surrounded by strangers and I didn’t even cry; I let manners kill my grief.

I should tell you, if love and dreams were mutually exclusive I’m sure what my choice would be. For now you are winning, but I can’t promise next month too.

What of those birds we’re not quite ready to release, should their cages be gilded or rusty? Should we kill them through smothering or neglect? Or what if we let them live?
Bray in August

The day before I leave we take the DART south of Dublin, along the coast. The beach has no sand, only cliffs and rocks. We put towels out, strip and walk into the wind. The sea is rough and unforgiving. You push out past the wave line, until you bob like a red-haired buoy. I hear your voice, calling me, lightness against waves. I step in, rocks on my soles, calf-deep, the water presses me back, knee deep, just when I feel I can go no further, a wave rises, and flips me in the water. In the end I sit on the beach, cut and bruised, and watch how you glide through the water like a seal.
Six Degrees

I cannot afford you.
Sometimes you catch me mid-laugh with a look to char
my skin, peel it free of
muscle and bone, or you

pull me tight, desperate,
rough into arms I have
coveted, squeeze until
my lungs threaten collapse.
Then, you scare me. You walk

over this desert form
with the taut, greedy look
of a man would kill
for water, or less. Your
footprints are baked into

my dunes. Every desert
was once an ocean, can
be an ocean if
you let it. My sands want
a swimmer to engulf,

to birth. My chest is an
oasis, a cavern.
You lick the walls, your hands
are caked with my clay-red
blood. You spread my ribs, sink

one leg, then the other
into me, stretch out, take
over. I am dry, but
you wait, for this body
to heal, to heal or die.
I am a Southern Baptist Pastor’s Wife. No one knows that I do not believe in God. I met my husband when I was just sixteen and I thought he was the spirit incarnate. Maybe that was my folly. Or could it be that when you are a wide eyed girl possibilities seem to creep up on you like a python on a mouse, silently but with such force that you can only succumb. My husband had his hand around my throat and we both knew the length of his arm, and no matter how I kicked, it always drew me back to the same spot. Which of you wouldn’t doubt his glory then?
Measuring Grief

It is called keening, what women in India do at funerals, that high pitched, wordless sorrow. I have seen it too, in Ireland and the black churches of my southern childhood. It is devastating to watch a strong-backed woman collapse on her prostrate lover, tearing at her body and his as if to marry the two. I think of the tight, screwed faces of my own family last winter at my cousin’s wake, their bodies bottled-up, rigid, their hearts more concerned with propriety than grief. I have always been that way, too calm, careful, emotionally flat. But just now the thought of you gone stings my eyes and squeezes my throat free of air. At the base of my spine is a small coal waiting to flame on the winds of your departure. It will lick up my back and rib cage, over my chest and neck, burning until I keen, my tongue bloody with the wailing.
Thanks for calling
drunk when you knew
I wasn’t home
and leaving a
message on the
machine, telling
me how you just
couldn’t make it
to dinner. Thanks
for slurring your
words when you said
you’d call later,
this after I’d
spent days cooking
for you. Thanks for
making me mad
enough to get
to work early
and go to the
gym and pay my
bills on time. Thanks
for the way the
anger burns a
hole in my gut
and how acid
in my throat re-
minds me to breathe.
Thanks for never
calling again.
How to Make Black Bean Soup

Soak the beans in your grief until what was stoic and granular becomes pliant and smooth. This could take hours or weeks. Set the pot to boil, then go about living. When your most bitter sorrow evaporates it’s time to begin. Add some pressed garlic for strength, ginger for stamina, a shot of sherry and handful of sugar for humor, and sweetness a pinch of salt and the juice of two limes for balance. Now sleep. Let it simmer. When you wake eat straight from the pot until all is gone; take it without bread or drink. This is no meal, it is a ritual to warm your joints, loosen your tongue, relax your throat, help you find your center again.
Silence and Shadows

I get out my toolbox. The air is still and the birds are nearly gone. The house looks like I am wrapping it to be sent off to China. The plywood makes the bricks look darker, older. With no windows, the house becomes a ghost. I cross the yard, the last loose item, a shovel, in my hands. The door opens into a tomb. Canned goods crowd the shelves. My nest is piled on the side of the living room, away from all windows. I have bedding, books, and a flashlight to see how the eaves bow under the wind. Dirt colored shadows crawl up the walls. Earth is turning on its axis now and I feel the push; its coming. But I am covered, to the soles, holed up, waiting for the storm to be gone.
A Matter of Perception

This is what I remember.

The hands that shook
even as the knuckles knocked
together, against the pine in question.
The fist formed then, that scraped
along the unfinished door demanding
your answer. I can see now
how you mistook this for rage,
saw the trembling hands twist
over one another, perhaps imagined
them bloody or vengeful.

The voice that shook
even as the tongue tangled
itself into a diatribe over the machine.
The throat slur then, that grated
against my ear drums, betraying
your whisky breath. Can you see now
how I mistook this for rage,
heard the words shotgun and waiting twist
over one another, perhaps imagined
them bloody or vengeful?
What kind of beast would turn its life into words?
What atonement is this all about?
--and yet, writing words like these, I'm also living

-Adrienne Rich
When I was young mother said my body was for God's eyes alone. She made me stay away while she bathed, no matter that we were built with the same parts. I saw no more than a wrist or neck or ankle of hers while she was alive. Now her corpse is laid out on the bed, waiting for me to change it to the blue church dress she wore every Sunday. My father is useless about all this; even he never saw her nude in full light. My brothers are in the barn pretending not to cry. So it's just me, alone with the woman I will become, afraid to look myself in the mirror.
Michigan

trailing sister down some shaded street it's summer
we step over sidewalk cracks chant *step on a crack, break
your mother's back counting as we go sister stops
at number fourteen stomps hard on the crack

black outside windows shaking we're alone we go
to the basement stop at the bottom step watch
the rat circle the room watch it watch us run
across the street trees whip overhead the neighbor
lets us in we all sit on her basement floor
tornado passes

same house mom is there we are carving pumpkins
she lines us up seven pumpkins two daughters
the camera clicks we wait for the picture to clear
she smiles sister smiles the pumpkins smile

the neighbor stands at our car window we are packed
to leave i beg her to find my cat mom says *he ran away
we pull down the street i turn and watch him dart around
the neighbor's porch this is the first lie i catch

Michigan ends here
Honeysuckle Vine

The girl stands contemplating the honey on her lips, her hand reaches among bees who work flower to flower, she squeezes another bloom on her tongue. A noise from the house drowns the bee's private humming, draws the girl back. Now she considers branches, touching each one with her fore-finger and thumb. Too thick and she may as well have picked the belt, too thin and the whipping cord breaks the skin. She chooses something in between and turns then, back to the house, last week's welts red as a tattoo down her back and thighs, stinging ever so slightly as she walks.
Requiem for a Woman

1

Heat is the barricade *I am the resurrection and the life* Mason- (Dixie) line *saith the Lord* separating fast and slow *he that believeth in me* dictating manners and speech *though he were dead* you and me *yet shall he live* 3 a.m. is the only time *and whosoever liveth and believeth* in deep July to sit outside *I know that my Redeemer liveth* and consider the wool skirts you wore *in me shall never die* bending among steaming Jersey backs *and that he shalt stand* your hands chafing *at the latter day upon the earth* their udders chafed *And though after my skin worms destroy this body* foaming milk pink with blood *yet in my flesh shall I see God* and my hands green now around the edges *whom I shall see for myself* nails dirt-black from pushing the mower row after row *and mine eyes shall behold* hot sweat christening my neck and shirt *and not another.*
Alone there are things you could not teach me *We brought nothing into this world* but you did your best to make *and it is certain we can carry nothing out* a woman out of a girl put a pan in my hand *The Lord gave* taught me that food feeds the heart and the *Lord hath taken away* pushed school *blessed be the Name of the Lord* but even three husbands later still shaped me for a man *Man that is born of a woman hath but a short time* showed me how to tidy life *to live and is full of misery* one seam at a time *He cometh up* like your mother did before you *and is cut down like a flower* Taught me to barter service for love *he fleeth as it were a shadow* made me more southern than you intended and never *continueth in one stay* educated ready made wife *In the midst of life we are in death* willing to drop everything for the man of whom may we seek for succor of her dreams but of thee O Lord or at least the man of the moment who for our sins art justly displeased?
What can a mother pass *Yet O Lord God most holy* to a daughter but hope *O Lord most mighty* and fear *O holy and most merciful Savior* I still see you standing *deliver us not* frozen by the garter snake moving *into the bitter pains of eternal death* in your shadow I was four *Thou knowest Lord* and you could not have reached me *the secrets of our hearts* even if the snake meant death *shut not thy merciful ears to our prayer* Two days later in the pool *but spare us Lord most holy* you coaxed me away from the edge *O God most mighty* but understood this was all I could manage *O holy and merciful Savior* I know I have not been the fearless girl *thou most worthy judge eternal* you dreamed of *suffer us not at our last hour* as if a small gray mouse *for any pains of death* could birth a lion *to fall from thee* You have taught me *I heard a voice from heaven* to hope *saying unto me* that finally all this *From henceforth blessed are the dead* will not matter and redemption will come *for they rest from their labors.*
Virtues of the Father

She tells me you were charming, 6-foot and lean, with broad shoulders and strong hands. She says too, that you always came straight home, after work, always handed over your check. No one can say you were not loyal, that you were not a worker, in the pure Stalin sense, ever willing to go the extra mile, ever there, ready to be fucked.
Ten things to be grateful for

With pessimist’s hands you’re uprooting life
even as it blooms at your feet. You say

it would take two years just to find ten things
to be grateful for. This is just a game

I play to ensure I still welcome my
breath in the morning but you treat it like

a prayer that can only be said once, in
clear, unfaltering voice, and can never

be taken back. Are you so careful that
every word is final the moment it

leaves your lips? Even then, surely God hears
tones of want and of necessity and

can distinguish between them. Gratitude
is not that kind of prayer, whispered alone

at night. Nothing should bear such weight,
but death sentences and a lover’s forgiveness.
The daughter of a cripple

must decide where her loyalty lies, with
the mother who cannot even feed her
alone or the father who is never
still long enough to hold her. What happens
when her father dies or leaves and mother
grows old or sick, who will she be loyal
to then? In the mirror she see a girl
who, even with two long arms, has not learned
to paint life for herself, who does not know
feet are for walking and hands for molding
the world. She does not know all women are
not like her mother, that fathers can be
armless too, that she is what’s normal to
the world. She sees only a girl alone.
Hail Mary
For Josephine Doucet Cormier

These days I'm thinking of you more, of how for years you lay down once a month, to be penetrated by the man you hated, doing your wifely duty, but still falling short, still two daughters dead, who left quietly in their sleep. For years you walked daily, to mass, sun hot on your back, to light candles and say the rosary. I think God must love persistence and bargains. The bible is full of women like you, tired of waiting for grace. And so you wore black, promised to do so for the rest of your life, if God would allow the next child to live. I imagine this is why I am here, because that baby, the one you kept so carefully, dressed only in white, for the first year of his life, is our link. I think of the cherry beads rolling over and over your finger tips, of the private council you kept with Saint Rita, patroness of impossible situations, who I invoke daily now, whose rose emblem is tattooed down my back like a prayer.
Where are the words

For what makes a father holds his child down by her windpipe
to lay his belt over the length of her body, or a mother sit by, hear,
and take a moment to spin tales of her own grief, she will later use

for her own defense. For the space between a child of your own
womb and one not, where an ounce more sympathy should live,
but does not. For the grandmother, who chooses to reinvent her life,

for three children who are not of her blood, or the weight she feels
at having to put her own child last because some crimes cannot be
forgiven. If there are shapes for these things, they are poison warnings,

yellow tape marked “Police line do not cross,” and tiny labels that say
“Hazard, may cause choking.” They smell of the slaughterhouse
at dawn, just as the first blood hits the floor, mixing with yesterday’s
bleach, the scent of adrenaline passing from one cow to the next.
What she will remember about him

that his wife wailed
over the coffin, tore
at her hair and tried
to climb inside;
that the family pulled
her back, wiped her

face, straightened
her mourning gown,
held her up; how that
woman was not alone,
and how from her
perspective, at the back

of the room, the scene
was nearly comic;
because he used to lay
her wide, run his hands
down her spine, kiss
the hollow of her knee;

she believed in eternity,
mistook these moments
for possession, wed
their names, and never
thought she would
become a silent widow.
Dream Poems

When God is Speaking to Me

I dreamed my house was burning. I stood outside with my dog and two cats. We watched it burn. There was nothing I could do.

The flames were too big to fight alone. Everything I owned was inside. I only had the clothes I was wearing. I watched it burn and was happy. This is what I like to call a moment of clarity.
Dream Poems

*What I Could Learn From the Dead*

Last summer when I was sure
I would die of my own heart

break I dreamed about a man
walking to my house. He was
tall and his face was shadow.
I only knew who he was

not. My Grandma always said
dreams are teachers if we learn

how to listen. She would have
said a man was heading my

way. She would have been right. I
wish I had known her better

when she was alive. She could
have warned me about shadow

men and how they always lie.
Dream Poems

*What No One Wants to Hear*

Three times I saw my sister pregnant. Three times I told

my mother, and three times she told me I was wrong.

The baby came in less than a year and stayed with my

sister for half that time.

I wonder if my mother really
didn’t believe me, or if she
had her own dreams of

the other side of the truth.
A note to all castrators

The label passed down from my grandmother to her daughters and their daughters to me. I said it with half joke half pride, part love part shame but never with denial. I felt no sympathy when I delivered him to the vet’s table. I denounced men who cringed at the thought of losing their own precious parts, who called me a sadist. When I went to pick him up he rolled over and I saw his little raw scrotum blue, withered, he licked my hand, wagged his tail, more concerned with greeting me than his own loss. I thought of him sniffing desperately for what was missing and then I was ashamed.
Salt

It was the summer of 90 degree shadows and women I loved crumbling, one salt granule at a time. The heat should have kept them together.

The man with the Cuban tongue came twice a week at dawn and even then we sweated. He made a point of washing the smell off both our bodies before going to work.

I read how thousands of Napoleon's troops died during the French retreat from Moscow - the results of salt deficiency. I tried starvation for myself and nearly succeeded.

Even now, in Europe, a handful of salt is thrown, after the coffin, into the grave. It is supposed to protect the dead from the Devil or at least pay their toll.

My roommate covered her room like a shroud-the walls, the windows, the doors- all black, and let her own salt store fall into her bed sheets.

In Da Vinci's painting the man with the spilled bowl of salt is Judas. Some believe he was passing the bowl to Jesus when it happened.

Ancient Hebrews called salt a symbol of the joy of joining around a table, said eating together meant living in brotherly love. We only shared half a house.

The Greeks exchanged salt for slaves and used it during sacrifices. But if the salt fell from the head of the chosen victim, it was a sign of bad luck.

I discovered even "the salt of the Earth" will weep at a woman's knees if she uses the right combination of words. I found that power intoxicating.

Union forces made a forced march and fought a 36-hour battle to capture Saltville, VA. During wartime, cities with salt mines are the first to be taken.

Four salt men were found in Cherhr-Abad. Germany did the excavating, Britain studied the remains, Iran gave them a home. This is the most they have cooperated in generations.
The First Month

The ad says “Live Model Wanted for Nude Photo Shoot, All Body Types.” For three days I carry this ad in my pocket, walk, to and from work, 45 minutes each way, to serve coffee, tea, and toast to bus loads of tourists. The managers swarm the floor looking for trouble, screaming to make us understand, begging us to give them a reason for dismissal. I’m the only one with a work permit, the only one fluent in English. But, we are all aliens trying to survive on minimum wage.

Alexie from Romania tells me to keep my head down and move more quickly. He wants to build a factory to create jobs for his people, just needs a little more money. Lana from Poland has not seen her son for two years. In the picture she shows me, he is four, slight, and blond. “It is better this way,” she says, “Here I can work and help my family. I talk to him every Saturday on the phone.” I am alone for the first time. My rent is a week late and bank account is overdrawn. My family does not approve of this move; I cannot ask them for help. At break time we’re allowed breakfast leftovers; we eat as much as we can, eggs, bangers, rashers, toast with raspberry jam. At the table I pull the ad out and roll the words *nude photo shoot* over and over in my head. How nude is nude? For dinner I spread peanut butter on bread and eat one slice at a sitting. On the third day I call. A man answers the phone and we arrange an interview for that evening. His house smells of coffee, sweat, and stale cigarettes.

For two hours he chain smokes and drinks gin while we discuss his artistic vision and my interpretation of it. He’s in to bondage and posing women in cold mountain streams and graveyards. He hands me a survey that reads “Model’s Artistic Interests.” There are seven boxes to be checked: *artistic, solo, nature, with same sex, with opposite sex, fantasy, S&M, all of the above.* I mull the options over. I watch him watch me. I think about Alexie and Lana, my blistered feet and the empty peanut butter jar at home, my mother telling me she told me so; I just check one box.
Goldfish

Even they have aspirations of greatness. One is lying on my desk now, his gills almost failed. But for just an instant as he flew, so salmon shaped, he felt glory.

In China they are called "fortune fish." Every restaurant has its own tank, filled with pop-can sized mounds of gold coins, swishing their fins and gleaming in the light.

When I was young we kept an oscar and a python in the same room. One ate mice, one goldfish. We called the prey feeders, like their only purpose was to fill another's belly.

I met an American in Ireland who had three koi swimming up his forearm. We talked for a long time. He was so familiar and so exotic.

You say I am a fool to keep four, fifteen-cent fish in their own tank, to spend so much money and love on them. I say everyone needs a champion, everyone needs to be one too.

They are said to have five second memories. One second for wonder, one for jealousy, one for love, one for curiosity, one for remorse. In a flash it's gone; they are innocent again.

But this must only be myth. Anything with sense enough to know me by sight and voice, to come when I approach, but hide from the cat, cannot be all simple.

A dream of live goldfish foretells of wealth and many successful and pleasant adventures, but a dead fish is an omen of disappointment. May your dream fish always be swimming.

*Carassius auratus*, for so long we have enslaved you, locked you in tanks and encouraged mutation. Your own gray cousins wouldn't know you now, so gaudy and bright.
There's something to bury, people, when you begin to bury. When your women are ready and rich in their wish for the world,

destroy the leaden heart,
we've a new race to start.

-Muriel Ruckeyser
The Armless Woman (one)

sits naked, pregnant belly rising, tight
and round, beneath bare, white breasts, little legs
tucked away. In one month her uterus
will contract, expelling a whole, perfect
girl with two long arms hanging down from her
shoulders like tree limbs and the woman will
teach her to use her mouth as a tool and
she will be punished at school for biting
but the woman will tell her, “sometimes teeth
are our only defense.” The girl will not
know how to recognize this truth until
her junior prom, when her date shoves her head
between his thighs in a fit of passion,
an act he’ll regret the rest of his life.
The Armless Woman (two)

keeps her paintbrush in her teeth and her heart beneath her breast. She knows that motion means more than the flailing of limbs. A world flows out of her mouth: twisted, gnarled trees perched on ocean cliffs take over her canvas, laying down roots into cracked rock. They bow and whip between land winds and ocean winds at once both wet and dry, yet there is strength in their solid bases. In the dark bark she paints her face. Those who find it say she has imprisoned herself. She could tell them about the joy of stability, its power and comfort, but with two good legs they cannot imagine a life with roots.
The Armless Woman (three)

was once an armless girl and because she
learned to sing before speaking her mother
began to see her small body as less
of a lesson in subtraction and more
a scientific equation in which
the parts were not lost, just relocated.
Her mother swore the girl would never learn
to be an invalid and taught her that
strength is not based on muscle mass, but on
willpower, that feet can be used as hands,
that tongues and voices can be weapons of
defense and though some people cannot see
past their own limitations, if they would
just change their perception, they would succeed.
It would be a disservice
to say he loved her art alone. She was
classically beautiful- high arching
brows, strong cheek bones, elegant chin, and she
was no fool in the bedroom, when he asked
in his boy voice, as if offering to
share a sweet candy, "would she like to go
down on him?" she complied, not out of lust,
or pleasure even, but because mother
always said, "pick your battles" and this was
no great feat, was in fact a skill that came
from years of using her mouth to direct
her life. But even this cannot explain
how he, upon seeing her belly grow
round, saw the possibility of grace.
Beauty

Call it ritual: The spreading of wax between legs, the ripping out of coarse hair.

Call it maintenance: That which is wild is cajoled into being domestic.

Or transformation: A woman is made to look like a girl, sometimes an infant.

This type of attention is called grooming, like the word for dogs, they’re one in the same.

When I had my dog shaved this summer he hung his head, was ashamed to be hairless.

When my groomer showed me the hair her wax strips had collected, I was ashamed too.
Twelfth Birthday

Imagine a penis,
a new budding flower,
popping up just as you
turn twelve and are starting
to think about boys. Soon
your balls will drop, your voice
will crack. Maybe you dreamed
of having babies, now
there's no turning back. No
more pretty dresses,

no more dolls, now it's pants
and fútbol. Now they'll call
you machihembras: first
woman then man. You heard
your mother's cousin turned,
so did your sister's friend.
Just like them you're stuck now,
balls can't be sucked back in.
Maybe you think saw
this coming, maybe wished

it all along, and since
you can't will your penis
away, you only hope
that it grows long. Somewhere
in the jungle a girl
has to learn how to be
a man, and some little
boy in Brooklyn, picks up
a doll and wishes he'd
been dealt a different hand.
Body Armor

You are walking around in a chain-mail suit. It’s more like swimming than the work of land mammal limbs, this is fluid, a gray haze that buoys and drags. You don’t know if consumption is the best word, but that’s how it feels, this protection you’ve fitted yourself with. It must be strengthened, by morning pills passed over your tongue, monthly shots, a copper tube hidden deep inside. With time the armor thickens, until you feel steel in place of skin, and even the touch of that feels dull. You think this would be synonymous with freedom if only your libido weren’t on a shelf, gathering dust, if you hadn’t cried over the ink spot on your shirt, had a panic attack last Tuesday, weren’t having hot flashes every night. You try to explain this all to your boyfriend, but he only hears “blah, blah, blah, I don’t love you anymore.” That’s not what you said, not even what you mean, but somehow it never comes out right. He cannot seem to separate the emotional from the carnal, and you can’t stand the feel of the latter anymore.
Caressing My Ovaries

I am set up to lose you, lying
knees askew on this vinyl, table.

The nurse prods my swollen uterus
with her glow-wand and you float, a pair

of dimpled orbs on the screen next to
my head. For two days I have cursed you.

I have hobbled through living, left arm
wrapped around my abdomen, holding

the pain as I would an infant, in
a close, terrible, necessary

embrace. Seeing you now is looking
God in the face. The nurse tells me you

are bleeding and I want to kneel down,
with my head touching the floor until

I am dry of tears. Instead I nod
and she says we’ll have to wait to see

if the bleeding continues, a side
effect of you doing what you are

meant to do. I don’t worry about
the children I might not have or scars

surgery might leave, but that I’ll feel
your absence like some essential piece

plucked from the center of a puzzle.
The Pill

In 1965 I would have been your champion too, and you strong enough to kill a fetal horse. But strength wasn’t the issue, it was passing that little blue pill daily across our lips, that was liberation. I was seventeen when the doctor put the first little pink pack in my hand, my mother’s request, her way of keeping her daughter smart.

Five years later you’ve been replaced by a ring I push monthly, over my cervix, where it guards my uterine gates, releasing tiny doses of poison. Little blue pill you gave my aunt breast cancer, this ring is the smarter alternative. Lower estrogen, fewer side effects, as long as it stays in place I’m covered. No more sucking down pills daily.

Little blue pill I know everything comes with a price, but this pain in my ovaries is too much. They are bleeding because after five years of not ovulating, thanks to you, they grew cysts from the friction of starting again when I forgot to replace the ring last month. Now I’ve spent two nights in the ER. Something’s not right.

So this is Russian roulette. Every month I touch my breasts, poke my stomach, wait for the bleeding to start. But God the sex! Little blue pill you didn’t tell me it could be like this. After the cysts passed I was a devil, my lover had to tell me to stop. The problem is, all I hear is my body, like a fog horn, telling me to procreate. Now I don’t feel very liberated.
The Take Over

My ovaries are attempting a coup.  
They are saying they’re ripe and full of eggs,  
Their voices ring with such a sweet tattoo 
They’re telling me to learn to spread my legs.

They’re primed and ready, chock full of fresh eggs,  
My ovaries swear they’re running the show,  
They think they can make me open my legs.  
They would like to tell my heart where to go.

They’re laying out plans for running the show,  
they want cake at ten and chicken at four.  
They’re sure they know best where my heart should go,  
like procreation is some kind of war.

You want sugar ten and grease at four,  
girls, I have to tell you this needs to end. 
procreation is not your private war,  
maybe it’s not even what I intend.

I really mean it, this all has to end,  
your advances are becoming quite rude.  
What if all this isn’t what I intend?  
Love is more than just an erotic mood.

Do your advances need to be so rude?  
You fill my dreams with caresses and sighs.  
I need more than that to be in the mood,  
I want to feel love, not hands on my thighs.

They fill my dreams with caresses and sighs,  
their voices mimic such a sweet tattoo.  
They only care about hands on my thighs,  
my damn ovaries want to stage a coup.
On Being a Woman

Little death. Little death. I measure my life in little deaths, live for the space between the lull and build that stretches, climax, climax.

This is not about death.

When I was thirteen my father called me fat. But he didn’t say fat, he used chubby thick, porky, but not fat. I wish he had said fat because I wasn’t and could have told him so. Instead he masked his meaning with terms I would apply to a puppy or baby. Maybe he thought I was a baby.

He did this for a year, every time he called. I told him to stop or stop calling. He didn’t call.

And then I go bigger, not fat, but taller and wider and I learned to eat and puke, eat and puke.

This is not about my father.

I love the feel of rough hands on soft thighs, my thighs, spreading, resisting, spreading

There is nothing more holy, no body part more holy, than a strong tongue. My God that’s holy.

The first time I had sex I did it to prove I could. I was seventeen and the sex, quite frankly, was dry and sloppy, but I saw its potential.
Some sex is ardor and passion.
Some sex is getting off and getting by. My body looks best in the morning naked, hands loving it, loving it.
Gratitude

There are at least thirteen synonyms for gratitude. Today has evoked about five. My favorite is acknowledgment. I watch someone I used to love drive by as I am leaving. I don't think he saw. I thank God for small favors, this is one. I was just at the funeral of a boy I knew only in a semi-personal sense: he tried to teach me guitar once. Now he is dead. He was only two years older than me. That I can walk away is grace. Sometimes I think I can feel fate hovering just out of reach, right above my head. Every now and then it slaps my skull to teach me a lesson. I always appreciate when it moves on to someone else.

Maybe you will be next, or that girl down the street who never brushes the hair out of her eyes when she speaks. She looks like she is hiding in her own skin. She doesn't respond when I approach her, only moves to the side as if I am wanting to pass. Every time I go to a funeral, I expect to see the person standing in the crowd. I almost saw him today. I learned something too, watching everyone else fall apart:

for my turn I want only laughter, dancing, every color besides black, and definitely no grief. I want only thanksgiving, not in the turkey-stuffing kind of way, but the thank-God-it-wasn't-me or praise-the-lord-she's-finally-gone feeling that makes people want to try harder to be better to their dogs, or at least get up the next morning without compliant. My mother clams up when I say this, she wants to believe children don't go first sometimes, like we have nothing to say on the subject, like caskets choose themselves, and covering yourself in a shroud is the only proper way to honor the newly dead.
In response to your question

I concede there are fish
who like bicycles.

I'm sure they're enjoyable
to ride, when swimming alone
becomes too boring.

I'm sure they're utilitarian
in their way; a bike can carry
a greater load than a single fish,

and perhaps when well
proportioned, they too can be
beautiful to gaze upon.

But answer me this,
what bicycle has ever
needed a fish?
Self Portrait
(or an itemized list of things acquired from ex-lovers)

the ability to spot a heroin addict & an introduction to The Cure

a painting of my ass & a lesson in intuition

a taste for masochism & my first good look at a penis

a love for casual sex & an appreciation of short men

some pertinent Spanish vocabulary & my first unwanted hickey

a lesson in anatomy & a dip in the Irish sea

an insight into the depths of self loathing & one mini-fridge

an education in techno music & a validation of German stereotypes

a major aversion to drunks & a really good mushroom trip

two winter hats & a distaste for missing teeth
If you want to keep a man

Once my ex told me, “If you want
to keep a man you should blow him,"
like it's some job criteria
no one mentions until after
you're fired: if you had only
filled the copier, we'd have kept
you, never mind you were the one
keeping the whole place together,
not to mention the copier
was dirty, ugly, and only
worked when you rubbed it the right way.
A Letter Concerning the Nature of Men
For H.B.

As someone of the male persuasion, I feel authority to give you the following clues on men:

Men, my dear, are idiots.

Men are the complete absence of logic, with an almost bi-polar relationship between id and ego. Most men lack a super ego, aside from the one where they think they’re superman. Men like to be worshiped like gods, and treated like dirt.

They like passive women who have loads of self-esteem. They like skinny girls with large breasts and sensitive girls who will fuck their brains out at a moments notice. They want respect, but they want to be babied.

If you want to attract a man, I would advise the following:

Do things to get a man's attention. Don't take any of his shit. Cook him a meal every once in awhile, but demand in return to be taken out. Withhold sex to get what you want.

Don't tell a man you love him. Make him tell it to you. And when he does, occasionally don't say it back. Prey on a man's lack of self-confidence. They love that.
A Woman’s Retort

I was under the illusion that the items you mentioned were mostly confined to high school dating scenes.

Still, let's see how I measure up: I'm a little lacking in the breast department, I don't do mini skirts, and I have a really hard time being too bitchy. That slow walk/back arch thing is a little uncomfortable and perfume gives me a serious headache.

That leaves me with humor, self-confidence (which is at times fleeting at best), and (in my opinion) gorgeous hair.

I always thought I did better when I played up my strengths. I like to think I'm good at being: smart, funny, nice, and sweet. But now that I think about it, I've scared off my fair share of men just by outwitting them.

By your own description men are petty, ego driven, often dim-witted creatures who like uncertainty and abuse. When put that way, men are not in the least appealing.

I think I better go find myself a girlfriend.
The Reply

When you do, don't forget to reward your buddy H.B. with pictures.
Aspen Sonata

If you walk further up the hill there are birch and spruce trees with only a few aspen in between. Down here among high bush cranberry decay, aspen are the only survivors.

The single largest organism on Earth is an aspen grove in Utah: 100 trees growing and dying all together. Every spring they take a collective breath, every fall a sigh.

Eighty years ago miners looking for gold here leveled every tree for miles, stripped the soil down to permafrost, pulled out the dust, put it back. Only aspen would grow after that.

Aspen grow like people, most are tall and straight. Their bark starts smooth and supple, then becomes hard and coarse, every year adds another layer. Age gives character.

Last fall, aspen seed invaded my house like a plague. It carpeted the floor with white down. I found it in my bed. I breathed so much I thought my lungs would sprout a tree.

They come in two basic types: male and female. Like humans they procreate. They never touch, only drop pollinated catkins that drift until the wind can bring them together.

In other parts, where there is more room to spread, a single tree can reproduce alone, sending up clones from their roots, populating a forest with themselves.

I live alone. The aspen here are getting old. I hear them creak and sometimes snap during strong winds. They sound like they are moaning; it makes me want to cry.

Sometimes aspen roots can stay alive for years after the parent tree has died. They remain dormant and sleeping until it is safe again. Then they appear, as if from nothing, and grow.