Daughters of Silence
*eight songs about experiences of women*

**I**
Daughters of Silence

They taught you well,
Antebellum women,
Daughters of silence.

Knife thrust of a child’s loss
Pierces the heart,
Scalpel of husband’s betrayal
Sculpts your flesh.

Close your lips tightly,
Deaden senses,
Go numb.
Go into your chamber,
Lock the door.
Stay until the agony
Is locked away for good.

Make sure your face
Reveals serene composure.
In time the mask becomes
Your face.  

_Inzer Byers_

**II**
Woman Kills Sweetheart
with Bowling Ball

The moon is loose in the gutter tonight
and it rolls without kisses
or handprints between us    Its mouth
is an O of surprise

Tonight the phantasma of love
climbs the stairs while we sleep    She
sags with exhaustion and booze
and pills    while her skin hangs heavy
and empty as hate
She floats so slow she floats
As if she is swimming through blood

    Shhh Shhh the lights are out
    and the little suspicion
    sleeps and dreams
    and whimpers in its crib
    Its tongue is ugly and blue

She climbs She climbs
in silence and fury

    spinning groggy
    in darkness and wind   Look
her left hand bears for you sweetly
a gift of lightning
and lilies to please you    Though
O    Tonight
in her right hand she    she
has invented gravity.

_Laura Kasischke_

**III**
Oregon Trail Journal

Two things we women notice most
Along the trail:
One the almost endless line
Of abandoned household things.

Easy at first, choosing what
to leave to lighten wagons:
heavy pots, that extra chest,
things expendable.

Later leavings get harder:
My mother’s rocker
Always home’s center, now
Left rocking alone
On the dusty trailside.

The other thing we women notice most:
The graves alone or clustered.
We speak sparingly of them,
Laconic journal entries:
Two miles, three graves;
Four miles, two graves;
Three miles, seven graves.

At first we’re just recording.
Then comes the sickness;
Our own deaths begin.
Quick-dug, a hurried prayer,
Hardly a marker, no time for mourning,
Always the need for moving on.

All things cherished left behind,
Blest be the tie that grieving binds.
Graves look different
with a familiar name,
link to link, hearts’ leavings.

_Inzer Byers_
When I Couldn’t Afford Poetry

IV

When I Couldn’t Afford Poetry

closetful of words heaped up ready for Goodwill on the refrigerator door the list grows longer ketchup-spattered words I would have written prose stalks me interrupted at every turn of phrase garrulous bills kids’ teeth supporting the receptionist Master Charged conscience prodding me awake heavy with words.
breasts aching full of words sunnyblooming wine days becoming headaches

…cumulus stanzas escaping through the blue sky no ballads in the crowds today go lyric glances

… home speechless with good sense words hustled into dustpans words clogging the drains and always waiting waiting three dumb notebooks pages smooth pointless as storefresh Wamsutta percale nobody’s rolled in

Susan Donnelly

Rape (song title)

VI

Rape (song title)

Constellation (poet’s title)

Although the stranger dragged me from my car, I am not robbed of my lover’s smell or touch nor of the arch of colors when he moves inside me

Although I screamed up the deaf street, my friends Betsy and Jane laugh with me around my kitchen table and the jealous cat creeps up to warm my lap.

Although the abandoned house had doom eyes and the graffiti mocked me, my mother teaches me the names of flowers, splitting milkweed pods so that their silver abundance lightens the air.

Although he tore off my clothes, Sister Theresa Mary lands me the Latin prize.

Although he beat me to the ground and that room stank of ash and urine and dead animals, my grandfather calls me Pixie.

from the back lawn after supper he shows me Cassiopeia… who moves as we move.

Although the thuds, the panting and pig squeals … pieces of moments tumble smooth for me like mauve and brown pebbles gathered on Nauset Beach.

Susan Donnelly

Hymn from the House of Trouble

VII

Hymn from the House of Trouble

So go now my love before you’re gone. Before you’re older, sadder, sicker, gone, though I’ll still be awake and waiting. I have nowhere else I want to go.

To go to the door of the House of Trouble

And decide I want to stay

Even when they tell me,

There will be three nights of pleasure Followed by thirty years bad luck.

I say, Fine. Let me sleep with that one, The one ….with the evil twin.

The evil twin with a bottle Whose name is the name of a saint, A drunken, fair-haired angel from hell, Passed out all night like a child in my arms.

There are hymns all night in the House of Trouble, Sacred snapshots of the dead, … all the men are drinkers, Slow drinkers drinking Until they only look like men I love…

The way he looks, the way he looks. And the smell of his shirts. And when his hands, and when his hands. I’m tangled to death in my own sheets, Gasping and snagged like a trout.

See all these are snapshots of you Looking green-eyed at the beach. All these snapshots are you before The bottle in your hand is empty…. So leave my love because I’ve become a believer. And I believe in another God, another life, a better, harder, longer life to come and I’ll come back and back to this place I am and when I do it will be with you, it will be with you again.

Laura Kasischke

Don’t write to me if you are married or over 50. Don’t write to me if you equate sophistication with the city, learning with degrees, success with acquisitions. Don’t write to me if you are the sort who would exile smokers, if you can’t stand cat hair, wrinkles or commitment. But if you ache for a real, whole woman, write to me.

NYRB Box 7927
There is a rhythm to it
folding the dough over
the fluid motion
of the heel of your hand
do not be afraid
fold it over and over
push it away
with the heel of your hand
when I was young
Grandma Marguerite made …
the dark loaves of the old world
Grandma Ruby in Mississippi made cornbread
…blackstrap and jam
do not be afraid….  
keep up the rhythm
and we will talk, my son.
of bread that will fill us
...and grain the first fruits
of all people
do not be afraid
a rhythm to it
kneading to stay alive
my son, you will know
what only a daughter would learn
how to survive inside this rhythm
centuries of women making bread
.....do not be afraid....
we sing and fight
we shed tears for our children
we the kneaders of bread
we the grinders of corn
we the sowers of wheat....
we who survive

in the rhythm of it, my son,
do not be afraid.
And in the name of
the woman who walks in shadows
the woman denied shelter
in the name of
the woman forced from her homeland
the woman who sifts ashes for revenge
the woman who searches for food
the woman who sees children burning
in the name of
the woman ...who gives birth in exile
in the name of
the woman who sings us to sleep
in the name of
the woman who tends the fire
in the name of
the woman whose hands bring healing
the woman who refuses to bow down
in the name of
the woman who turns to the Mother of God
the woman whose child dies in her arms
in the name of
the wound and fire of her longing
I promise you
We will all return
There is a rhythm to it
Folding the dough
over and over
the fluid motion
of the heel of your hand
do not be afraid.

Teresa Anderson