

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

IV
When I Couldn't Afford
Poetry

closeful 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

V
Epistolary

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

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.
I see dust
puff from the crimson
auditorium curtain.

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

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

VIII Kneading Bread

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