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Python Crown Girl

Jade Hurter

University of New Orleans, jhurter@uno.edu

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Python Crown Girl

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Creative Writing
Poetry

by

Jade Hurter

B.A. McGill University, 2011

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Preface: The Furies Sing

I didn't grow up in a house filled with poetry. Like many young writers, I had to build my own canon. Through all of high school, my greatest loves were male poets, and I saw them not as mere mortals, but as purveyors of a higher and nearly inaccessible truth. I taped a copy of e.e. cummings' "somewhere i have never travelled" to my mirror in order to memorize the poem; I read Dylan Thomas's selected poems and found myself mesmerized by the ways he could bend language, the way he made it look easy. I adored the male-authored love poem, in which the woman played the role of muse. Neruda's *Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair* was a seminal piece of my education, and I was devastated to later learn that he was a known rapist. Like most teenage girls who find themselves outsiders in their high schools, art meant more to me than just an aesthetic object. Poetry represented some grand truth; it represented a world beyond the artless, mundane life my hometown seemed to promise. I remember the first time I read T.S. Eliot's "The Hollow Men," encountered by chance in an English textbook. It seemed almost blasphemous to think that those words, which imagined "Death's other kingdom," could be written by a mere mortal. Poets, then, were beyond criticism. Like most very young writers, I saw famous poets as secular gods.

The only female poet I encountered with any regularity in those formative years was Sylvia Plath. I read my copy of *Ariel* over and over, entranced by the final lines of "Lady Lazarus": "Out of the ash / I rise with my red hair, / and I eat men like air." Her poems were unlike any I had read before. They were raw, hateful, and unapologetic, written on the brink of the poet's suicide. But they were also written with immense skill, and I found myself troubled by English teachers who dismissed Plath as nothing more than a depressed woman, who would

never have found fame without the mythologized death, who was beloved by high school girls because we were so naturally melodramatic anyway. Later, when I read Ted Hughes' *Birthday Letters*, I realized that Plath's poetic legacy was at odds with her husband's memoir in verse. In "Caryatids (1)" Hughes says of an early Plath poem, "I felt no interest." Reading *Birthday Letters* feels voyeuristic, as if Hughes took Plath's body of work and reduced it to a fraught love story with a tragic end. Though *part* of the story, Hughes' sense of ownership over Plath's legacy troubled me. He turns Plath into just another female muse object whose purpose is to inspire his own work. Though he takes responsibility at times for their failed marriage ("But I failed. Our marriage had failed," from "Epiphany,") Plath's legacy suffers at the hands of his own self-reflection, in which she plays a part but has no say. So I began to see that being a woman poet might not mean writing love poems; it might, instead, be a fight for legitimacy among men.

Through the work of Hughes and Eliot, I learned the place of women in poetry: they are either virtuous or sinful, and sinful women, like Eve, bear responsibility for the downfalls of men. In a poem titled "Fidelity," Hughes writes of a woman with whom he may or may not have cheated on Plath, "She did all she could to get me inside her." This is one classic position of the woman in poetry: characterized as a seductive devil, she tempts otherwise good men to infidelity. She inspires evil with her dangerous sexuality. In "Sweeney Erect," T.S. Eliot paints the orgasmic woman as a hideous monster: "This withered root of knots of hair / Slitted below and gashed with eyes, / This oval O cropped out with teeth: / A sickle motion from the thighs." The opposition between good and bad women is a hallmark of both Hughes' and Eliot's poetic attitudes toward the feminine. In "Fidelity," Hughes presents Plath as the ultimate "good" object of his desire, while the other girls are just incidental. Hughes compares "those naked girls" to "a sinless child" buried beneath the threshold of the future he hopes to build with Plath. Hughes

acquiesces to the girls' advances, but ultimately they are nothing, as innocent and naive as children, finally killed off within the poem. Eliot's poem includes a more traditional opposition: the "Madonna/whore" binary, in which the owner of the boarding house, Mrs. Turner, is married, chaste, and named, while the woman in Sweeney's bed is nameless, monstrous, and dehumanized. She represents a Freudian castration anxiety with the "sickle motion" of her thighs. At their best, bad women cannot be held responsible for their smiling and flirting, which undermines male dreams of transcendent love, as seduction is merely in their nature; at their worst, bad women are whores, threatening to dehumanize and symbolically castrate the men they seduce, losing control of themselves and slipping into dangerous and frightening hysteria.

Despite his attitude toward the feminine, Eliot remains one of my favorite poets. The Modernist ethos always appealed to me: the idea of depersonalization as outlined in his essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent," the impulse to create work stripped of sentimentalism and focused around the image; I understand the Modernist obsession with rewriting Classical myth. However, Modernism was, according to Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in "Tradition and the Female Talent," "constructed not just against the grain of Victorian male precursors, not just in the shadow of a shattered God, but as an integral part of a complex response to female precursors and contemporaries" (690). Gilbert and Gubar considered the sentimental Romantic and Victorian era a "contaminated and metaphorically emasculated century," and Modernism, with its emphasis on depersonalization, promised a cure. As I came to understand more about the basis for the Modernist movement, my relationship to it became increasingly problematized. Though love poems brought me to poetry in the first place, as I grew older, I came to see that kind of sentimentalism as often endemic to "bad" poetry. I scoffed at the idea of poetry as self-expression, and wholeheartedly embraced Modernist ideals, but how could I justify my love of

Eliot when he was so anxious and even hateful regarding feminine sexuality and "feminine" aesthetics?

I didn't encounter the female Modernists until later, and when I first began to read H.D., something clicked for me. She embodied perfectly one solution to the difficulty I found myself in: how to write unapologetically as a woman without wholly rejecting masculinist aesthetics. In the poem "Sea Lily," she writes:

Myrtle—bark
is flecked from you,
scales are dashed
from your stem,
sand cuts your petal,
furrows it with hard edge,
like flint
on a bright stone.

In this reimagination of the myrtle, traditionally a sacred symbol of the goddess Aphrodite, H.D. tears away the feminine aspects of the flower, instead describing it as something hard, dangerous, and self-sufficient. Sand "furrows it with hard edge, / like flint / on a bright stone." She weaponizes the feminine, challenging notions of femininity as soft and fragile.

Women writers are necessarily influenced by the men who came before us, who showed us what poetry could be, but we must struggle to love them despite their innate sexism. (Not to mention their innate racism and homophobia.) They do not provide a model with which we can work; we can only work against it. In their essay "Infection in the Sentence: The Woman Writer and the Anxiety of Influence," Gilbert and Gubar counter Harold Bloom's idea of the "anxiety of

influence," in which male writers enter into a kind of Oedipal struggle to destroy their literary forefathers, with the feminine "anxiety of authorship." A woman writer must engage in a different kind of struggle, a struggle against her place in the canon not as creator but as muse-object. She must work against a tradition of male authors who "attempt to enclose her in definitions of her person and her potential which, by reducing her to extreme stereotypes (angel, monster) drastically conflict with her own sense of her self - that is, of her subjectivity, her autonomy, her creativity." Women writers, then, look not to our literary foremothers as influences to be destroyed, but rather as role models who "legitimize [our] own rebellious endeavors." H.D. and Plath were my first literary foremothers, who showed me that I did not need to flatten my identity into male-authored tropes. They provided a model I could work within, not against. Though Bloom defines the poetic process as a kind of sexual encounter between a male poet and his female muse, I have begun to see that women can be more than the silent objectified muse. We can speak for ourselves. We can speak against a male tradition.

blood, honey, the first section of my thesis, does just this: the formerly objectified muse speaks, awakened to fury, madness, and suffering. The word *fury* comes from the Latin *furiaes*, which is the Roman translation of the Greek *Erinyes*, the name of the group of female hell-goddesses who exact vengeance. An inherently feminine word, *fury* both empowers and dehumanizes the woman to whom this state is attributed: her fury makes her monstrous, and this monstrosity can become a source of power, elevating her to a goddess-state. Where the woman who inhabits the role of "angel" is expected to be gentle, kind, and domestic, the monster-feminine is genuinely dangerous. My speaker in *blood, honey* is a woman turned monster: she adorns her body with dead things; she cuts her own eyes out with "a paring knife." Unlike the Greek *Erinyes*, however, she exacts vengeance upon innocent things: animals, birds, herself.

These are poems about the struggle for agency, and this speaker often uses—and misuses—violence in attempts to regain control over her self and her body. In "Still Life," she wears a crown of ibis bills; in "Moon Song," she kills a kingfisher and makes a headdress out of its feathers. Her quest for agency becomes sadistic and masochistic; broken as she is, she cannot find a harmless way to exorcise her fury.

Written in the aftermath of a breakup, the poems in *blood, honey* also document my struggle with the societal imperative that a woman should not speak of her suffering. We are taught to be silent, to keep our emotions at bay lest we be thought, like Eliot's orgasmic female object, "hysterical." However, "depersonalization" no longer felt like an option for my work. I needed to inhabit a poetics of revenge, a poetics of anger and suffering. Anne Sexton's *Divorce Poems* have been an essential guiding text, helping me to express deeply personal experiences through poetry. In lines like "I am stuffing your mouth with your / promises and watching / you vomit them out upon my face," from "Killing the Love," Sexton shows that honest fury is not unfit for poetry; indeed, it can make for visceral work. I follow her model especially in the poem "self portrait, age nineteen," the most confessional poem I have ever written, let alone made public.

Where the speaker in *blood, honey* is "woman turned monster," the speaker in part 2, *The Metamorphoses of Rey*, is a monster turned woman. The character of Rey came to me after reading a poem written by CWW graduate Kia Groom, titled "Be Were." The poem explores a woman's transformation into a deer, and I became obsessed with the idea of what it might mean for a wolf to turn human, reversing the popular myth in a different direction. How would a woman who had lived her whole life as an animal, literally "raised by wolves," act? As her character evolved, she became less wolf, more indeterminate predator. Her character, who

murders men after an experience of sexual assault, enacts a poetics of revenge. I struggled with how to transmute the desire for revenge into poetry that would not come off as shrill, and Rey has allowed me this space by enacting her own misguided revenge on every man that hits on her in *The Stillwater*. Rey, as an animal-made-woman, eliminates the complexities of human vulnerability. Paradoxically, she only becomes truly sadistic once she has experienced womanhood. As an animal, she was a predator, but as a woman, she kills for pleasure, to exorcise her fury.

The objectification of the body is an essential motif in both *blood, honey* and *The Metamorphoses of Rey*. Through these poems, I explore objectification and the male gaze by allowing my speakers at times to reverse that gaze, at times to inhabit it fully--in "slut song," for example, my speaker embraces her role as slut, reclaiming a term used to denigrate feminine sexuality. In lines like "once you trusted me / to hold your cock between my teeth," she essentially flashes the male gaze. Other speakers adorn themselves, like the speaker of "Still Life," who makes herself into an art object, mirroring the effect of so much muse-driven male-authored poetry. Rey, for her part, reverses the male gaze, objectifying men before murdering them. Jim's hair is "flaxen as a storybook maiden's": like a woman of fairy tale, he is reduced only to his physical beauty, and will be victimized, though in this story, no one will come to save him.

The body also experiences transfiguration throughout these poems. Rey is the most obvious example: her body is in thrall to the phases of the moon, transforming every time it waxes full. Her guide, the centaur Chiron, is able to transform from centaur to man. Another centaur transforms into a man in "Man Turning into a Centaur and Back Again." Hybridity and transformation fascinate me, both as portals into a world of myth and magic and because they

challenge concepts of the body as tied to a mostly static human form. The body in these poems is ever-changing and, at times, avoids objectification specifically because it is not a static object, and thus cannot be perceived as such.

It is an act of rebellion to make the female body into a place of refuge and powerful transformation. I work in these poems not only to reclaim the body from aesthetic objectification, but also to reclaim feminine symbolism from its association with a tradition of angelic femininity. The domestic sphere in these poems is not a place of comfort maintained by a Victorian "angel in the house," but rather a toxic and stagnant realm. In "The Eschatologist's Wife," for example, the marriage bed is "filled with the feathers / of crows." Neither doves nor thrushes but birds that are dark, predatory, and hoarse come to symbolize this union. In "and I was glad," I compare domestic violence to "leaves of spearmint breaking" and "a spool of white thread tightening." The domestic realm becomes dangerous and sinister, the trappings of sewing and gardening synonymous with the lover's cruelty.

The moon, too, a traditional symbol of femininity associated with menstruation, is an essential motif in these poems. Though driven to madness not by the moon's effect on her femininity but by a man's violence, Rey transforms at the behest of the moon, *The Metamorphoses of Rey* begins with "Legend," in which "The Moon [is] bitten from the sky." My speakers either watch the moon vanish and reappear—through natural and unnatural means—or enact their own small power to alter the moonlight. In "Moon Song," the speaker "[covers] the moon with one hand." Like the body, the moon is mutable.

I want to challenge and expand notions of the feminine through symbolism, transformation, and engagement with the male gaze. The speakers of my poems are not always successful in their rebellion; instead, these poems explore how fury can become impotent, how

women broken by cruelty cannot always redeem themselves, and indeed should not be expected to: it is not the responsibility of the victim to quell and placate her anger. However, through suffering, these speakers do reclaim their bodies by searching within themselves for refuge. Ultimately, like the body, like the waxing and waning moon, femininity in these poems is a mutable force, weaponized through fury.

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blood, honey

*I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead.
(I think I made you up inside my head.)*

-Sylvia Plath, "Mad Girl's Love Song"

*Now my life is sweet like cinnamon
Like a fuckin dream I'm livin in*

-Lana Del Rey, "Radio"

Red Song

Flamingos rise from the earth,
pale as blood.

Half-mammal,
I wander the salt flats

calling your name. Silence forms
like a stone in my jaw.

I remember loving you
in the cranberry bogs

of another world,
your skin cold in the mud.

I knew you: an amethyst digging
into my bones.

Now you have swallowed the water
from earth.

I remember nasturtium blossoms
wilting on your tongue,

the star-shaped wonder
of the amaryllis.

And want to watch my own red drain
in a brilliant sea across the salt.

The Divinings

#1.

Your body is cool as gems.

In the evenings you fill the teacups with grapes

which I have pulled
& spit

from their stems
into your palms.

You splay me wide

on a bed of charcoal.

You enter me and leave no space

for language.

#2.

Here on the floor you cut grapes
into pieces.

 Your hands slick as
the inside of the grape,
the inside of the body, turned
outward.

Your teeth are pressed close together,
like a cluster of grapes
 & here you are alight.

I have never seen you speak.
I touch you with my shadow
only.

You push a stone into my skin.

.

You have never seen my guts.

self portrait, age nineteen

with a dick down my throat that is not yours
the boy is pushing me down it is like being drowned
and even drunk you always came
twice at least your body always overflowing
but he wasn't going to finish until i choked myself to sleep
or begged for it to stop
and i remember telling you about this
sitting on a curb in autumn smoking cloves at 2am
you were wearing a sweater your hair was clean
your lips bright candy under the streetlight and you seemed like maybe
you thought i was stupid for letting it happen like you realized
then and there that maybe you shouldn't have let me take care of myself

what you did to me later was better i guess
you whiskey-drunk in bed with my best friend while i
was a timezone away
you in our bed with another girl a girl who had a husband
while i was cold without you
under an electric blanket in april it didn't feel like drowning
or at least not in the same way
and it took you six years to tell me that you were horrified
on that night when i told you when you were the only person
i told because i was always
so drunk and stupid and in love with you
and now you're near me like a spectre when i am with other boys
i hear you telling me to respect myself as if you still love me
just not enough and i think of the way you called me sunshine
how you always watered the plants too much
how you were the only person i trusted to touch my hair
while i went down on you how after sex i liked to suck your dick
until you came again and i would fall asleep between your legs
with the taste of you in my mouth
holding on to both your hands

slut song

you never wanted to touch
 my hair
i was a python crown girl
ugly and unable
 to let go

now i like my hair pulled hard
 while i get fucked
 from behind
harder til your shadow turns
 to sugar in my brain

once
it rained petals in our garden
tea singing in the kitchen
our skin rough with soil

now my body grows thorns
and crystallizes
you could cut your palms
 on my pelvic bone
now i am bleeding meltwater—

once you trusted me
to hold your cock between my teeth
 now i am one big fang—

and I was glad

after Carole King & Courtney Love

He hit me and it felt like
 leaves of spearmint breaking
like a spool of white thread tightening
He couldn't stand to hear me so
He hit me and it felt
it felt like the moon moving
 through a car window
 like swallowing fire
Hi hit me and
 the walls turned to honeycomb
it felt like *yes* like *this*
 like *hush*
He hit me and it tore
 a sickle-shape into morning
He hit me
 and I knew—

Moon Song

I am casting a fishing line toward a heavy moon,
a dead minnow on the hook.

I am covering the moon with one hand.

I am catching a kingfisher mid-air
with a long-handled net

and gently choking it.
I am wearing blue feathers in my hair.

I am digging the marrow from my bones
with a spoon.

I am melting it over a brushfire.
I am restless. I am sleeping in the center of the bed.

I am dreaming of a still lake at midnight

where I cut out my eyes
with a paring knife.

I am watching the water darken
from the branches of a pine.

The Eschatologist's Wife

I.

I was a child when we married,
nineteen, with seasalt under my nails.
It was February, beneath a dying oak.
When he kissed me, there was a pearl
hidden on his tongue. I took it into my mouth carefully
so as not to choke.

II.

Our marriage bed filled with the feathers
of crows. Their ghosts invaded my sleep.
Mornings I would find eyelashes in the strangest places,
behind my ears and between pages
of the Sunday Times
or embedded in egg whites, partly cooked.

III.

In the top drawer of his bureau: three chunks of chalcedony
and a nest of my own dark hair,
his talismans against mortality.
Those days were a haze of lilac
and I was out on the porch every night,
smearing fireflies into my skin.

IV.

For three years he covered the bedroom walls
with clocks, loud as click beetles.
Still he slept, lashes dark and lips parted.
Mornings we memorized the Harper's index
and ate real maple syrup,
the consistency of water.

V.

One summer we awoke to find the yard
a jungle of poison hemlock, sprung up overnight,
choking the fruits off of the peach tree.
He uprooted the plants with bare palms.
For weeks after he wore gardening gloves
when we made love.

VI.

That year we vacationed on a shoreline covered
in pink jellyfish. I gathered them in piles
on the sand. They glowed in the sunlight.
Dead starfish dried in the sun
as we cooled our hands in the tidepools.

VII.

He became an old man
as my hair silvered.

I watched him on the porch after dusk
rubbing asteroid dust over his body.
Those nights the earth became small
and the flowers waned dark.

VIII.

He left gemstones
scattered throughout the house.

I buried him in the sea,
his ashes floating like wet stars.
Alone, now, I think of the seaweed
drinking him in like salt.

ghost

in the red hills

your body

was a ghost

on the edge of the freeway

///

eyes big as bluebells

rimmed

in grackle feathers

& shadows

///

your ivory arms

growing thorns

& reaching outwards

to pierce the red earth

Man Turning into a Centaur and Back Again

I.

In the desert a man is turning
into a centaur,
lower half dark, glistening sweat.
His teeth are those
of a herbivore.
In one hand is a rope
attached to a blinded kestrel.
The bird's ankle is weighted
with an oriole carcass.

II.

You cannot swallow songbirds whole.
First, you must catch them.
Then pull off the feathers, pull out
the fused collarbone.
Suck at meager flesh. Your body
will fill with song. Rising like bile
in the throat.

III.

The centaur is catching songbirds,
the kestrel floating
like a fishhook.
A falcon smells
the drying blood. Its feathers shine.
Beneath its shadow the sand
turns to glass, briefly.

IV.

The falcon is not
a mythic creature. It is a bird, still-eyed
and calling. Mortal as a worm,
belly filled
with birdflesh, mouth empty.
Soon it will be a thing in chains.

V.

The centaur turns back into a man.
He unties the kestrel
with gentle fingers. Detaches the carcass.
Pulls the threads

from the eyelids. Lets go.
The kestrel flies heavy
into the desert sun.

VI.

Spit out the bones
of the songbird, now.
You've caught the falcon, golden fish.
Adorn your body with its feathers.
Lash your palms across its beak.
Drown it in a tank of sky.

Blue Song

I.

First the low wildflowers along the bus stop where
two blue warblers
bright as blood
pick poison worms from clover.
Then clustered like berries in a bamboo grove,
two blue finches,
their beaks in the sunlight.

II.

After a storm, blossoms fall
from the chinaberry, staining the soil purple.
From its petals rises
a swarm of blue birds. Their feathers sting
like caterpillars in spring.

III.

Today the telephone makes the sound
of small wings beating
and the air around me fills
with answers. On the end of the line,
the indigo bunting spits his blue song:
what? where? see it! where?

sun song

i have drunk too much honey and my body grows heavy with bee spit with
marigold dust sticking in my throat i grow heavy enough to sink
in a clear pool of water body round shining like a marigold sunlight
making veins in the water and my body of honey and spit rinsed and glowing
 and now i have drunk the clear pool of water sweet as honey and i turn to blue from
golden and the marigolds float like bees in midair

the inner life

the rhododendrons here grow
wild.

retreat into
the succulent petal. slip

into the yellow green of pollen. even
the rain in
the body is
green.

the inside of
the body is soft with
moss. it is
a forested room, bisected
by river.

the body floods with
green.
make the body rainforest,
a cave of
dripping leaf.

Leda & the Swan

I guess you've heard that swans are reptile-shapes, fallen asleep in the snow, awakened shining. So I don't have to tell you that when young, I was attacked by a swan large and screaming: Nesting season, thick spring, pink jelly raindrops alighting in the pond nearby. The swan rose before me, marshmallow soft, neck twisting like taffy, took my dark wings in its black beak and tore.

Eyes fell from my feathers, scattered like pearls. It swallowed all but two like hard candy. The swan ripped me open, dug golden dust from behind my ribs, swallowed my second heart still-beating. It licked the blue fur from my body, left me naked as a shucked oyster. And then the swan became a cloud. Its white wings dark the sky.

Still Life

In which I hold a piece of quartz
between my thumb and forefinger

In which the roots of waterlily
grow down the back of my throat

In which I hold a knife
to a whistling duck's dark neck

In which white ibis are stuck
like maggots to my body

In which I pick them off, one by one
to reveal glowing wounds

In which I wear a crown of orange bills,
curving inward like tusks

In which my belly is swollen with egret blood,
though you cannot tell from looking

In which I am a sculpture of feathers,
dipping my palms in the river

In which I hold a knife—

The Metamorphoses of Rey

Why does a child impulsively strike at a butterfly as it flits past him? He cares nothing for the insect when once it is beaten down at his feet, unless it be quivering in its agony, when he will watch it with interest. The child strikes at the fluttering creature because it has life in it, and he has an instinct within him impelling him to destroy life wherever he finds it.

-The Rev. Sabine Baring-Gould, *The Book of Were-Wolves*

Legend

When Rey was a child, her father
told her this story:

*They say Moon was bitten from sky
and shadow drenched the Earth.
It slipped across the belt of sun and we
ran free through Forest like fanged gods.
Our bodies did not glow. Our teeth
shone pale as night blooms. The swamp
was a dark pit so filled with fish they say
you could dip a paw and a trout would catch
on claw. Our pupils swelled like planets.
That was the Age of Night. But warblers
and deer and nutria grew blind. They starved
and soon, predators starved too. The fish
died in the darkness. And so the clawed ones asked
an albino fawn to hang Moon back in Sky.*

The Albino Deer

Furred antlers blossoming
into gardens of bone,
shadows of faun spots newly faded,
his body drifts through Forest
the way a cloud makes tendrils across the sun
before dissipating.
He has come to the lake, and lowers his body
into the shadows.

Beneath an azalea bush,
flower petals dotting her fur,
Rey is a shadow among shadows,
her breath a faint mist.
She smells his blood,
thick as honey.

Water falls, now, from the deer's soft lip,
mulberry dark. Rey's mouth cannot yet form
the word, *water*, and saliva drips
from her teeth.

The deer dips his pale head again.
Sunlight falls on his back.

Rey pounces, claws tearing open
moonflesh. And inside is only muscle, marrow,
like any creature, insides spilling
into the water, dying the pale hide pink.

As she swallows, her body
glows briefly.

In another part of the forest, a centaur
climbs from beneath the earth.

Annunciation

Rey asleep in a cypress grove.
Above her, orb weavers gather,
eight legs shining on each.

Her mother and father quiet as stones,
her own body filling with mist
and letting go again.

The girl all animal now, quiet, teeth tucked
behind dark lips.

That the belly of the spider can hold
so much: their abdomens
hanging between needles
block out the thin moon. They make
their own rain, spinning liquid in the dark.

Still she sleeps, pale as a star,
darkness clinging tight
against her skin.

The webs fall
over Rey, thick as a blanket, shielding her
from light. Dewdrops settle
in the sticky folds. The spiders disperse,
leave her body in its shroud.

June

Moonlight. Rey is shedding her fur
in ruby sheathes Watch. yellow eyes
flood with black, teeth shrink and soften

*The smell of Forest growing faint,
the trees turning to carved shadows—*

She is naked now and upright
her back a mirror for the moonlight
She is hiding her pelt beneath a stone
She is naked now She is hungry

//

Skin shining darkly breath sap-scented
and forest an echo in her throat
Rey is a woman glistening.

Sweat blooms, soft as fur.
The night burning hot as a blessing.

++++

The creature before her,
lower half a giant deer,
muscle, shining
and upper half human says

*I am Chiron
and I am here to guide you.*

I am Rey I am—

*A human girl. Or almost—
Look at your body: See the shadow
on your breasts. Your hairless arms,
your long fingers.*

The stars like teeth stuck into the sky
Cicadas laughing

Chiron hands her a shirt, torn jeans,
and dark leather boots
Rey's fur is lifeless in the dirt—

Bury that. and don't forget where you've left it

The earth is thick with pebbles
and her fingernails, softer than claws,
crack against them as she digs
and Chiron kicks pine needles across the soil:
they settle into a nest of mud

So what now?

Get dressed, and I'll show you

++++

The bar glistens:
a darkness punctuated by the sparkle of poker machines
and quarters shining on the pool table.
Chiron hands her a bottle, calls it Bud Light
and disappears
into a cloud of men near the pool table

A man turns to her.
Hey.
his skin like the bayou in moonlight, eyes pine-dark

Hey she says

What's your name?

I'm Rey.

I'm Charles his mouth on the bottle *so what*
do you do?

Um. I
hunt?

So do I! You never meet girls who hunt.

hunting: the silence of a deer
moving through sunshine—

hey can I buy you a drink?

Rey forgets Bud Light
Chicks love fireball right ha ha
she wraps her unclawed hand around a tiny glass of stinking liquid
and sips

Ha ha come on drink it all! Charles says and he
tilts the glass up in her hand.
The liquid pours down her gullet:
warm, hot like the blood of a living buck,
something only her mother could catch and Rey
is beginning to like this.

++++

*So why don't you come home
with me?*

*That sounds nice I don't really have
a human home*

In the car: the trees of Rey's homeland blur
paint strokes
beyond the windows, the ground rushing by—

and reflected as in River
she can see her own face through Forest:
short nose, wide eyes,
skin unfurred,
hair wild and long.

What is this! asks Rey

It's a '92 Cadillac Seville!

Charles seems pleased at the question.
Rey is moving through the world fast
as a vulture, skimming on air yet
held by gravity. Rey will always love,
she thinks,
92 Cadillac Seville.

++++

The house is an old shotgun painted the color
of cypress needles in spring.
Charles touches something on the wall and suddenly
the house is bright as dawn.
Let me get you a drink he says

his hand on her hand, fingers around a cool glass,
ice clinking as Rey sips the liquid

Now he clasps her hand, places her glass on a table,
snakes his arm around her, fingers new frost
his teeth gnawing like her mouth is a cherry

Rey pulls away, instinct to bolt, but she has
no claws, no teeth, only girlflesh
descending into the warm floorboards
where she will think only of the nails
pressing into her back
and of her own fingernails,
blunt petals

++++

The next day Rey awakens,
the man asleep beside her:

cock limp, breath like crabapples rotting—
Her whole body hurts

and she is no longer a woman
but a clawed thing with fur

She is shivering and scabbed
she is sick with hunger

Bruises blossom across her legs
She cannot open the door

but smells the swamp through open window
and lifts her carcass from the floor—

Rey's Prayer

*O let me slip out of muscle and bone,
leave my girls skin among the pine needles.
Let the Crows make nests of my fur.
O make me a Tree of impenetrable wood,
bark ringed, leaves falling
like hair. Let edible fruits grow from my branches.
Let the raccoons sleep in my hollows.
Instead of blood I will drink the Sun,
branches stained blue with Sky.
And let no man touch me.*

Rey smells horse, opens her eyes.
Shadows stain Chiron's chest.

*Let me answer this prayer for you. Have you seen
what the men do to this forest? Have you seen
the saws, the guns, the camouflage,
the beer cans? You are stronger
as a woman.
Think of Apollo holding always a severed piece
of Daphne's flesh. Cherish your eyes, your teeth.
Honey, you
are made for killing. You've seen
what they do to us, the bloated carcasses,
heads severed and mounted over their hearths,
fur plush between their dirty toes. You are not
one of them. But they do not know it.
See what they've done, and take revenge.
I will show you how.*

Rey watches the moon wax,
an egg rising from night's throat.

July

The fern-eyed centaur walks out of the forest:
sweat like wax down his body
Rey follows briefly longs
to taste his flesh

How terrible his beauty:
Muscles carved like cut gems

He turns to see that she is following
and his open mouth glows azalea-white.
She thinks of him sucking the flesh
from human bones
his eyes dark as forest portals
in immortal sockets forged underground—

This time she knows her howl—
How terrible her beauty,
her voice of a siren

++++

The jukebox glows moon yellow

(my girl, my girl, don't lie to me)
(tell me where did you sleep last night?)
(in the pines, in the pines)
(where the sun never shines)

The floor spreads sticky beneath her bare heels.

At the bar Rey presses her feet into the metal chair legs.
A man beside her, hair flaxen as a storybook maiden's.

He drinks a glass of whiskey. The ice cubes clatter against the glass.
Her eyes swallow his pale skin.

(my husband was a railroad man)
(killed a mile and a half from here)
(his head was found in a driving wheel)
(and his body has never been found)

Hi. My name is Rey.
Hi. I'm Jim.

++++

Jim orders her a shot of whiskey. It glistens darkly.

*So, what
do you do*

She just smiles, waits—

*I train horses. So they can be ridden,
you know. I break them.*

The silhouette of a buck rushes across her pupils, she thinks
of the ungulate meat, thinks of riding
through forest, claws embedded in flesh and fur.

She drinks her whiskey; it burns
like fresh blood.

*Have you ever ridden a horse?
it is like becoming
the animal itself wild*

And her pupils dilate as she reaches over
to dig nails into his thigh—

*oh? perhaps some day
you could show me*

with wry smile teeth shining like the coldest star

++++

The moon throws shadows through the windows.
Jim lights a cigarette, breathes fire into Rey's mouth.
He is saying:

*you walked here? these woods are no place
for a pretty girl. anyone could be out there
besides snakes gators wolves bears.
I've seen things out here with eyes yellow as murder.*

He chews an ice cube, swallows the shards.
She moves her hand across the back of his,
ragged nails stroking the raised blue veins.
She forgets nothing

And she knows what he will say next
almost can recite it with him
his words spreading out before her
like a carcass—

no place for a girl

his voice glowing like coals

so why don't you come with me

++++

She lets him lead her to the dusty parking lot.
Rust-red pickup truck, smell of cypress
from the forest. The radio on,

(I'm a crawling king snake baby)

the key in the ignition. How she loves the glisten
of the metal, these tiny human things.

(and I rule my den)

where am I taking you asks Jim

(Gonna crawl up to your window baby)

*I thought I might come with you
let you show me around these parts*

scrunches her toes into the fuzz of the carpet
tiny pebbles digging into her nails

(Gonna crawl up to your door)

well alright he says exhaling
the smell of whiskey like overripe apples

(You got anything I want baby)

He glows in the dark like polished stone,
his hair bright as fireflies

(Gonna crawl up on your floor)

The moon still rising, round as a pearl
how about I show you around these woods

(Cause I'm a crawling king snake)

yes she says *I would very much like that*

(And I rule my den)

August

The Stillwater shines like a forest moon.
Chiron hands Rey a Bud Light
and disappears
into a cloud of men near the pool table

Hey, are you going to pick a song or just stand there all night?

Rey looks up to see a human girl her age, star-blond and fire-lipped

I—I'm sorry—I don't know—

Well. Let me help you out then. Grins, all teeth, cigarette glow,
dropping dull coins into the machine behind Rey

(thunder only happens when it's raining)

Where you from? I haven't seen you here before

Uh...Baton Rouge. Chiron has told her to say this.

(when the rain washes you clean you'll know)

The girl smiles, all of her shining—
Yes, okay. Come with me.

(I keep my visions to myself)

++++

She leads Rey to the bathroom,
where a mirror glows above the sink
and Rey sees again the image from the Cadillac window:

a gold-skinned girl, white pools
at the edge of her eyes
hair knotted like roots—

I know what you are.

What?— *But how—*

and the girl transforms before her,
feathers piercing flesh
neck lengthening, white down caking
the shrinking wrists
wrists vanishing—

and now she opens her pale wings wide

a knock rattles the bathroom door
and the swan yells *We're busy!*

looks to Rey laughing, eyes like dark marbles

Hey. I'm Layla.

Incantation
July

*Summer is soaking into the door of the Stillwater,
wood swelling, and outside an oleander stretches its body
up toward the hoverflies*

Rey throws poison flowers in the air, watches the male flies chase them

*Mockingbirds trill from the oaks and Rey thinks
of tearing out their feathers with the claws of another body*

*Morning is breaking over the bar
Her nightform soon will grow animal*

*She waits for the moon to fall
waits for gold sun to burn the blue from the sky*

The Girl Loves the Swan

*The bayou snakes through Forest
like a vein of onyx
orb weavers hang golden curtains
between the cypress
and on the mud-slick banks
a white bird glows
in the arms of a woman
skin and feathers rising and falling
their breath mixing softly
in the thick brackish air*

Notes

My Chiron is a sort of composite of the Greek Chiron and the Dantean Chiron. Like Chiron of antiquity, this centaur, is a guide, grooming Rey to become a slayer of monsters—in this case, not the hydra, but human men. He has been corrupted by his time as guardian of the violent in the Inferno: an eternity watching the most violent of men wrestle each other brutally in a pit of boiling blood has made Chiron a killer in his own right. He isn't here to protect Rey, so much as he is grooming her to share his hatred.

Vita

Jade Hurter is a poet living in New Orleans, where she teaches freshman composition, volunteers with young writers through the organization Big Class, and works with the Scholastic Writing Awards of Southeast Louisiana. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Tinderbox*, *Animal*, *New South*, and elsewhere.