

Self-Portrait With Arm Down the Throat of Hades

Caitlin Dayspring Neely
Cincinnati, Ohio

BA in English, Northern Kentucky University, 2014

A thesis presented to the
Graduate Faculty of the University of Virginia
in candidacy for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

Department of English

University of Virginia
May, 2016

*Self-Portrait With Arm Down
the Throat of Hades*

Caitlin Neely

Table of Contents

Season.....	2
I.	
Rapture/Darkening.....	4
Bride With Violets in Her Lap	5
Persephone, Before	6
Undine, Meaning Wave	7
Merope, After.....	8
Hills—	9
Tinder Language	10
Merope Before Her Wedding.....	11
Maria Vermeer, Delft.....	12
Nausicaa Asks Her Father for a Ship	13
This is Not Devotion.....	14
Persephone Phones Home	15
Mary.....	16
Self-Portrait With Arm Down the Throat of Hades	17
Salt.....	18
II.	
A Walking Tour of Creation.....	20
Origin: Eve	21
Blur	22
Arrival.....	23
Domesticity/Urgency	24
God of Forgetting.....	25
Decorative Arts.....	26
Ohio.....	27
And Tomorrow And.....	28
Woman With Hunger Burned on Her Tongue	29
Parable.....	30
Sideshow	31
Chopin Plays His Last Concert	32
Come Spring, Come Flesh, Come Bright Earth.....	34
<i>Notes</i>	35
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	36

Season

Winter ends at noon.

You blackberry, you darken.

Evening—shimmer body,

shimmer breath and materialize.

Salt-ground, your dress

high above your ankles,

the world splitting open.

You are happy.

You think you are the happiest

you have been.

God-tongue,

mouth of Greek and mud.

It is yours.

The field kneels.

I.

*Is this the earth? Then
I don't belong here.*

—Louise Glück, “White Rose”

Rapture/Darkening

A field vanishes at the edges.

Trail of cars from the highway.

I lean over rail and hound's tongue,

morning glory. Remember me

bent back, blooming, struggling

with the light. None of this is speculation.

Bride with Violets in Her Lap

All night long, snow-struck.

Lake song, the bouquet

behind the dress of a bridesmaid.

All night long, winter.

Bury your hands in him, bury

him. Having come from field,

having come from rust. Hands

shut in prayer. All night long,

scraping of heaven against pine.

Persephone, Before

Spring's edges:
lungs, lungs.

The lake specked blue
here and here.

My mother in a small house
on the hillside, spark of junco

by the door. The well
a dark shadow, my face

in it, shining back.
Yes, I would love

to see you. Let's put our lips
together. Let's whisper.

A hole in the earth,
late April field.

Dusk emptying—
Yes, yes—

Undine, Meaning Wave

I gather bruised, unruly vegetables from
your mother's garden. She doesn't
recognize you anymore. We cut carrots for soup,
you brush the back of your hand
across her forehead. Weeks after she passes,
litany of waves, overgrown weeds,
your body small at the end of the yard each
morning. Boxes stacked in her room:
fur coats, jewelry I don't want. You tell me
what you desire is a wrist, lips suspended
beneath a veil, ring bound to a finger. I twist
the cork out of a wine bottle. How
much you love me. My body: wrack of sea,
hollow, bowl of berries to leave by the door.

Merope, After

Ruddy constellations
of fish in the market,
figs sliced open like a brain.
The bee-eater nymph
barters with a shopkeeper,
his prayers tucked
under the bowls of spices.
Outside, she circles
the white villas of Chios,
her teeth bright, olives
wedged between her fingers,
the sea just beyond the hills.
She remembers her husband's
uncoined tongue, his body
persistent, boulder-heavy:
how he begged her
to come with him to Hades.
Her star-faced sisters
always pitying her—

The hills quiet,
blackberries smothering her palms.
She does not speak of him,
does not speak of anyone.

Hills—

August: jaw hinged,
sharp scent of swallow.

Summer like flesh,
nettled.

Having been stained,
having been rapt and bodied

phosphorescent. Inside
the mouth—acre of longing,

of mountaintop, opening.
The heart's small honeycomb

of earth. Sit with me awhile.
I have so much to tell you.

Tinder Language

Always, fire forming.
Always, what I have lost

in the edges of trees,
in the mountaintops: violet.

Startle of doe,
knocked out dogwood.

The muddy woods
unfurl. What cannot be said,

the body of a field.
Cervidae, Cornus florida.

Hills like vowels.
My mouth a sea—

Merope Before Her Wedding

Mother, I am not
who you say I am.
My mouth full of bees,

embers on my tongue.
The field swollen
with moths, fleeced

and see-through. You say
the darkness around us
is a house filled with earth.

Maria Vermeer, Delft

no tin cups for pretend

no dusk to speak of

mother father is gone

ships dapple the Hague

the ground where he's buried

mix azure and oil this is

in the yard the sky

no mouth to press to mine

no downpour of clouds

mother are the eggs done

small fires in the air

I set up an easel

called love chickens

father is tin

Nausicaa Asks Her Father for a Ship

There's a gap
between two of her teeth
where she rests her tongue
before speaking. At the edge
of Scheria, the sea:
the blue of a long sleep.
The water full of linen. Her body
two wet blossoms
opening and closing. She winds
the wet robes around her arms,
knows to drape them over
lotus branches, knows
she is beautiful. Odysseus
in his nakedness,
Nausicaa the only woman
whose name he didn't utter.
Yes, she did love him, loved
the way he reached for her hands
and touched them. But she's begun
to forget even the color of his eyes.
She asks her father for a ship,
a figurehead of Artemis—
she's been told she looks like her.

This is Not Devotion

I tell landscape like it is.

A deer's gray coat—dull lantern dusk,
sprouted honeysuckle—knot of hills.

I turn it inside out. I sharpen the edge.

Call it forest blossom; call it doe's head;
I want you to want it.

Persephone Phones Home

The town mourns
glazed settlement, bundle of woods.

Snow the usual way. Grave
of myrrh near the river.

A loss of words,
her heart God-shaped, unsuspecting.

Mary

The mountains eek,
bob and weave.

Magnificent: used.
Mercy: discarded.

The theme unfolds.
I divide the words in half,

tread through hymns. Open
the loss like a forest.

Self-Portrait With Arm Down the Throat of Hades

So what did you expect? My hair tied up like an empty nest.

My naked breasts a room I don't share with anyone.

In your stomach flecks of bone, cigarette ash, coins

from the river. You're choking: I want it to be air, a door,

a name. Let the field return to a field. Mother in the kitchen.

Portico mother, doll mother, garden mother. The earth

is finally opening. A little world I stick my head into.

Salt

The cave: almost sonnet.

What happens,
narrative in light.
Darkening—a mouth
split & emptied.

How to say hello.
How to touch you.
The canopy a field

of stalagmite, gypsum.

Night hangs like hands.
Our bodies are murky here,
hollowed out; blot

of leg and torso, salt-
mined. A hush.
Speechlessness a kind
of landscape.

II.

*Blessed are they who remember
that what they now have they once longed for.*

—Jean Valentine, “The River at the Wolf”

A Walking Tour of Creation

Once black clouds
engulfed the sky.
Cincinnati buried in ice,
a 7,000-mile long lake:
shore lush
with ash & cattail.
The mouth of the Ohio
opened, heavenly
the harbor blued.
Earth in earth,
the fields river-risen.
Do you know miracles?
Do you know your body,
its uncomfortable
questions? Language
has gone terrestrial,
mountains cutting
through our bones.

Origin: Eve

Take me by the hand.

The world swollen,
limb-groved, shored up.

Now water
green with fish.

All mercy-hum, all
geography. Eyes and eyes

and river. My mouth
excavated, unloosed

of beauty. Here,
our bodies part

like wildness,
darken with trees.

Here, little low heaven,
the eroded blue
spring.

Blur

Hi, midnight, hi farmland.
The afternoon like snow.

The landscape: take this off, take that—
all at once hands in the trees,

the face I've been wanting
crystallized, twig-soaked

in salt mine. Plankton
luminescing sea:

a beekeeper headlong in comb-husk
torso halfway

into chasm, honey-gorge. You,
shy in a picture:

hair down, legs crossed,
light along the edges.

Your hollow was a temple,
river-mouth, holy.

Open carefully,
descend me. Beyond the field,

beyond the circumference—
no conversation. Anatomy:

waterlogged, spilling. Soil
draped over my mouth.

Arrival

Up North, I can never remember

what sea tastes like. *See:* memory,

see: Ferris wheel-covered boardwalk.

The drive down 75—Chattanooga, Kissimmee,

Fort Lauderdale; the waves full of worn

vowels, whale bones. The far-cry

of gull, the dark on dark scrawl of landscape,

scattering of heron. Everything

falling, everything shore and flesh.

Domesticity/Urgency

You tell me beech is best for the yard.

Is this urgency? The dishes in a pile by the sink,
the untrimmed rose bush.

Take my hand. *Take my hand.*

Loneliness gets easier. Desire

becomes ordinary—

the field at dusk, old light in the trees.

The deer eating the perennials again.

God of Forgetting

My mother teaches me
how to rinse parsley.

Dirt ripens the drain.
Her ring by the sink

a piece of air. Gardens caught
in our teeth. The moon

outside: an accident,
a dog sifting bones.

It's dinner, early fall.
Ella on the radio. Me snapping

my fingers, my crumpled jeans
the color of river

after a storm. The sound
of chopping, pots boiling,

dry pasta torn in half,
everything forgetting itself.

In my picture books,
the Styx ferried bodies

to the beyond. Every grave
green shoots.

Decorative Arts

That the first thing you slip into is a dress,
florals cinched around your hips. Morning
like a plum, your mother on the phone.
Marriage is the country of laundry: the balcony
heavened with clotheslines. Rosemary chicken
on the table by five. At the art gallery opening,
the name of the bowl plucked from the Northern
Song Dynasty ricochets from your mouth. *What
is this glaze? Is that a tree or peacocks in flight?*
You stumble up the stairs. Below your window,
people break beer bottles on the pavement.
Let the world wait for you, let you not forget
what hunger means: shouting
from the soaked street, a city on its knees.

Ohio

Sink full, Etta James.
Always a dog in the yard,

heat in the air. Handful
of blossom: dogwood,

violet. Years swell wild.
Creek in dusk. Acres

of fog. Now rain. The lines
of the storm, God-rust.

And Tomorrow And

The kitchen
a gaping mouth. The milk
never in the right place.
The pantry bare.
The bedsheets. The body
in my hands—nightfall,
wisp of hair.

The deer
swallowing the garden,
the bright light.
The song you make
from the kitchen,
the blue, blue
rain, the warmth.

Until you open the door
and don't come back.

Woman With Hunger Burned on Her Tongue

How little you are
your husband says,
his arm curled
around your waist.
Locked cabinets,
bread clenched
in your fist. Outside,
plums hang from the trees
like stalactite. Small
islands of bees rummage
through the fields.
You see him slit
a rabbit's throat,
the body is suddenly
limp, the ears
tangled in his hands.
You dream of empty
plates, tie bow strings
around each tooth
then slam
the bedroom door.

Parable

When we were young I showed you
lakes made of mouths and fire.
The sky was full of ash
and then wasn't. Gardens nested
in our backs. O' heavenly father,
horse-heavy, God in gold. The body
is made of elegies. Find me here.
I am growing a city in my hands.
Pulling strands of sky to the earth.

Sideshow

Every direction treeless. Every house
I've lived in stacked up like
milk bottles. They're watching me

from the windows, lined up
to catch a glimpse of the girl
who doesn't feel, who

doesn't cry when the boys
tug at her skirt, pull barrettes
from her long hair. If this

was a dream the field would be
water already, my body naked.
The curtains in the windows

something I could float on,
froth of white. Night-tinged waves.
But there is no sea here, no quiet.

My mouth is a pinned butterfly.
I cut a stone out of the air.
How pretty she is, they say,

their noses singing the glass.

Chopin Plays His Last Concert

I am the unmarked graves
dotting the Chaîne des Puys,

leftover from when the land
still erupted—steep,

endless. Now at the bottom
of the hillside: a garden.

Everyone suddenly here;
hushed. The marigolds

like a sea, three white dresses
in the crowd, but not you.

Last week I dreamed
you were in a hot air balloon,

the volcanos below you dark
as your mouth when it opened

against mine. They told me
you married another man,

said he was like me but not
like me. Afternoon wind—

I imagine George grasping
the music sheets, her fingers

coated with pollen, drops
of honey unfurling from her lips.

For the last time, applause.
Small talk. Plates and saucers

stacked up past my elbows.

I steady myself against

the piano. Laughter;
congratulations: *you played*

so beautifully. My body
bright and full of dust.

Come Spring, Come Flesh, Come Bright Earth

I.

Enna is full of geese. Horses flood the meadows,
 their mouths muzzles of light. She is not allowed
 to touch them. Only watch as they fade to poppies.
 She bathes in Pergusa, the bank heavy with monarchs.
 Her hair grazes mud & silt, water purls around her feet.

II.

In her mouth
 vegetation, crickets.
 Wingéd throat.

She gathers a field
 of fish in her body,
 dense with night.

III.

Persephone	full of longing	and dark gulls,
this is not the sea.	Your face	in the earth,
your mother	waiting for you,	calling for you.
In spring,	you return to	the hills,
the grain,	her. How	ethereal
you are,	she says, how	new
everything	is, Hades	so far away.

Notes

“Season:” The line “the world splitting open” is taken from a letter Sylvia Plath sent to her mother.

“Bride With Violets in Her Lap:” The title and the line "all night long" are taken from fragment number 30 in Anne Carson's *If Not, Winter: Fragments of Sappho*.

“Hills—:” The line “having been stained” is taken from fragment number 4 in Anne Carson’s *If Not, Winter: Fragments of Sappho*.

“This is Not Devotion:” Inspired by a photograph, *Moonlight Wanderer*, taken by Gina Vasquez.

“A Walking Tour of Creation:” Thank you Lisa Russ Spaar for the title.

“Origin: Eve:” The line “little low heaven” is taken from the poem “Spring” by Gerard Manley Hopkins, and “the eroded blue” is based off of a line from the same poem.

“Blur:” The line “take this off, take that—” is found in the poem “You Can Thank Me Later” from Mary Ann Samyn's *My Life in Heaven*.

“And Tomorrow And:” The title comes from *Macbeth*.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to the following journals for publishing these poems or, in many cases, different versions of them.

Banango Street: “Hills—” & “Tinder Language”

Bear Review: “Mary”

Connotation Press: “Origin: Eve” & “Come Spring, Come Flesh, Come Bright Earth”

Day One: “Nausicaa Asks Her Father for a Ship”

Devil’s Lake: “Blur”

DLAGRAM: “Arrival”

Passages North: “Chopin Plays His Last Concert”

Sixth Finch: “A Walking Tour of Creation”

Sugared Water: “Persephone Phones Home” & “This is Not Devotion”

THRUSH Poetry Journal: “Bride With Violets in Her Lap” & “Season”

Thank you to my UVA workshop buddies, especially Annie, Rob, Courtney and Veronica. Thank you to Lisa Russ Spaar, Rita Dove, Debra Nystrom, Greg Orr and Paul Guest for being my guides and mentors these past two years. Thank you to Kelly Moffett, Mary Ann Samyn, Larissa Szporluk, Mary Szybist and everyone at the Community of Writers. Thank you to my parents and family for always supporting and encouraging me.