

A painting of a woman in a blue shawl holding two red birds, with a cityscape in the background. The woman is looking to the left. The birds are bright red and have long beaks. The background shows a city with a tower and a building. The overall style is classical and somewhat somber.

WEIRD
WOMEN

poems

Sarah Archer

Weird Women

poems

by Sarah Archer

Cover Art: Young Woman with Ibis, Edgar Degas

Contents

Salem	1
Good Housekeeping	2
Moon	4
Sacagawea Dollar	6
Flower She	8
The Shunammite	9
Valentine	11
Marina	12
Hair	14
Caput Medusae	19
Myself	21

Salem

I dreamed I had red hair and wore bells,
coven darling, singing in fire, saint of secret things.
I rode the deep green for a spell
and dipped to slake with bowing wolves, ringed
the ravens in their laughing mummers play,
night-cowled, my wrists moon-spangled.
I kissed the crescent moon, that dying eye,
processed in raiment where the slick things mingle.
I was not afraid to die.

But morning finds me moony, bone china brittle.
I swallow the thin air like an oath.
Dry day is keeping on outside my window: a girl
already at the wheat, white cap sat atop the rows
that stretch from left to right like barren pews.
Bare, too, the droning of doves over day's bleary eye,
the bare branches, the sky a slack Madonna blue.
My life awaits me: the crops, the loaves to knead, the wool to dye,
and coming down the corn, three men bearing stones.

Good Housekeeping

I'd ask you in
but there's a nest of snakes at the door:
my babies, don't mind them,
but they do bite.
All right, step over,
a little higher, there you go.
Yes, hang your hat
on the hungry griffin's head,
you'll get it back
when you leave,
so better leave
before he's devoured it.
Let me pull you out a chair.
Brush off the feathers
of the fanged Aztec goddess,
settle in her belly,
don't let your feet
strike the eyes on her toes.
Coffee? Of course.
You'll have to drink from this hollow skull,
all I have, so embarrassing,
but freshly washed, of course!
Cream? Sugar? Arsenic?
You just have to try a cookie:

my grandmother's recipe,
though I like to throw in a few extra teeth.
Oh? Going so soon?
I'll show you out—this way,
front door, not the smoking portal.
Easy mistake, happens all the time!
Come again,
bring a friend,
I just love eating new people.

Moon

Kidneys come in twos, twins
eyeing each other in the fleshy dark,
curled like fists.

And cardinals show in pairs,
a crimson flash never far followed
by his mild brown mate.

Swans, too, in twos,
and the brute tusks of an elephant,
and sycamore seeds wedded in papery wings.

But I am one: Moon,
chilly rock, bad mother.
All-visible, untouchable, as fenced
as white from black.
I've heard of siblings,
somewhere out in the silent reaches of space.

I'll salve my loneliness with the sea:
see how he rises tender to my reach,
glittering in my gifted jewels,
and rises again, and again,
faithful, relentless.
I love to watch.
He is insatiable for me, isn't he,

rearing his small head into the fathoms of air
and collapsing back,
lapping lovesick at his tether.

Sacagawea Dollar

On the obverse: our stoic Sacagawea, her hair parted
not too neatly, her neck a brazen column,
straight as north, her cheekbone
a gleaming ridge of gold.

Her baby is plated to her back, boon from the foreign husband
who won her gambling,
her one small constant through the wilderness.

On the reverse: the usual eagle, the *e pluribus unum*,
a handful of stars.

On her face, a coy backward look...

*Come hither with me into an old new land,
cragged and jeweled, a land of mist and fires,
land of lean winters,
of thundering buffalo and snakes that kill men
and black seams of earth.*

*Come with me through mountains,
we will live on tallow candles
and the deserts will sting your blue eyes red.*

*Come with me and we will walk, walk, walk
until the hills crackle with gold,
gold for your coins and your crosses and your sick teeth,
gold which will bury our sons.*

*Let my bright hard face blaze the way,
walk behind me, behind the infant splinted
to the steep valley of my back,
behind my language,
behind my golden girlish face of no harm.
Hold me at arm's length
in front of you as a guide, shield,
a charm to stun death, a fathomless talisman.*

Flower She

Drunk on her abundance,
you thirst after her rose throat,
fold on fold enveloping you
in a skirt of peach melba, her blushing curtains.
You dip in and scar her fragile face
with a kiss, leaving with loot
and gold dust on your crown.
You punch off on seed-small feet into the brassy sky,
and for a strand of time, her petals tremble
with your disappearance.

Other flowers jostle for your eye,
arc and breathe open to you
as if you were the sun:
the quaint clematis clinging to a pergola,
shedding buttons of dew,
the heavy-belled columbine
filling the violet shades of the forest with perfume,
fields and fields of tousled poppies, tossing
their colors up like silk scarves.
You have many calls to make by evening.
And she will remain, rooted and splayed,
until time crumples her like a used tissue,
footprints in the wet brown bruises of her skin.

The Shunammite

“Everything is all right,” she told the servant,
though hours before she had held her son on her lap,
watching his sudden blooming illness,
the wet bright eyes, the quick small pants of pain,
until he died.

Strange son, who seeded in her
like a weed in winter, unexpected,
unasked for, un hoped,
then unfurled fresh and fragile,
miraculous with life,
her reluctant hope fulfilled.

She always used to watch for Elisha,
her solemn friend,
fierce lightning rod of faith and fury,
hers ever, but not fully of the world.
He came and left suddenly,
from anywhere at any time,
and so she would leave the lamp on
in the upper room she built for him:
a beacon from afar, should he see it,
the small, steadfast fire
she would not snuff out.

Watching again, now, as the prophet
lies on her son:
the staff will not do, the servant will not do,
the full heat of heaven
must be siphoned through this semi-sacred flesh.
The man covers the boy,
mouth to mouth,
eyes to eyes,
hands to hands,
his furrowed finger pads grazing the child's knuckles,
those small bones smooth and white as lamb's eyes,
until the limp form warms,
stirs, sneezes, sees,
and the prophet once more gifts the shaking woman
a son, redeemed
to perilous life.

Valentine

It's going to be hard to let you go.
There's something in your devil's eyes I like,
the cool way light gleams off your skin,
that jazz cellar, swanky midnight blue,
dark brows arched like the tips of your keen teeth,
voice like rain sliding down stone walls,
and something I like in the way you walk away,
so much so I might just let you
leave my life.

Come on, dear, this cave's for two
and chains are pretty things when they hit
the light just right.
I might just keep you for a while, pet,
and decorate my den with trophies—
sure, dear, just a lock of your dead black hair.

Marina

Every seventh of a day, I live a year.
The world turns on its tiny spindle
and stars crash as they reel through blind space.
But hey, I hitchhike, fly high,
sing on Tuesdays, glitter on Sundays.
I will be this young forever,
if I have to die to do it.

I'm going to let the music in,
flaming from nerve to nerve like lightning,
let it sway me
up and over and under through some twister track of infinity,
feel as my long hair tickles my bare back,
footsteps thumping a rhythm through my flesh,
sweat fogging off bodies,
lights glossing my limbs like honey.
I will meet the dark
eyes of men across rooms.
I will sniff the drowsy flowers,
dazzle my gums with wine.
The night is here
for us, forever.

It only takes three long leaps

for my toes to touch oblivion.

Hair

I.

When I was a child I had my mother's hair,
now I have my great-grandfather's
from many years ago.

In ten years, maybe, I'll wear my sister's,
or else an alien mane I'll have to morph to fit.

Flesh of my flesh that will not quit:

I keep a lock from when I was eight years old,
still supple as the day it sprouted,

but the new hair keeps coming in strange,
trying on fresh contours and colors.

The only way to preserve it
is to cut it off.

II.

Hair comes in the colors of the earth:

black of a spider eye,
pale brown of a dried leaf,
winter white.

Curls close to your scalp
like a dense pad of moss,
or streams wild past your shoulders
wind-whipped as grass.

Lies above you

like the sky.

Grows over you while you sleep

like clover over a grave.

Grows from you after you die

like flowers opening their red arms in a vase

three days after a funeral.

III.

She started it for her mother: a simple work,

sweet embroidery of a flower basket

topped with buds copied from her sampler book,

worked on a scrap no larger than Mother's locket.

No lock of hair, simply snipped and ribbon-bound:

she'd thread a needle with her strands and sew

something greater than herself. She'd wind

a pretty picture from her pale floss, just so.

I.

My mother's college braid lay in the attic

all my childhood,

coiled in the bottom of a box.

She'd braid mine

and pin it around my head like a halo,

gold as apple jelly.

One time, trimming my fringe,

she nicked my forehead with the silver scissors,

pricking a red bead of blood.
It's something we do for each other,
women and girls.

II.

You can trace the years in hair,
like rings in a tree:
the strong young roots, brown and hardy,
the sun-tinted tips, petal-frail.
The dandelion fluff of children,
bearer of wishes.
Underwater, hair flares and ripples,
waves like goodbye.

III.

The embroidery started gold, a girl's hair,
strands unwound from a boar bristle brush, or pulled
off sleeves and bodices, or, no time to spare
and inspiration hounding, plucked straight from temples

under which the fever built, the dream
that chided her to weave on, to add a maiden
to the basket, a landscape—path, hills, stream—
to the maiden, embroidering till sun

met sun and day bled into day, year to year.
The threads deepened to a russet brown,

then frost stole in, a glint of silver here
or there, and white took hold before the work was done.

I.

We lose hair as we lose days.
Long strands lain across floorboards and porcelain baths,
black curled over the white at the shower drain
like calligraphy.

II.

The rabbit at the end of my fence
doesn't see me, eyes low-lidded,
milky soft with sleep.
Then, with first a swivel of the ear,
then a pivot of the head,
she marks me, bristles alert.
I still, holding my breath.
She swells, puffing her fine fur
in a show of size,
meets my eye with hers, now water-bright,
brandishes her fluffy tail,
and disappears into the brush.

I breathe: a fine thing had and gone,
a wild thing, yet close enough to care for,
with warm mammalian breath,
and skin and blood and hairs

like those just lowering on my arm.

III.

Her mother was too long gone now for the gift.
She'd never had a daughter. She could have sold
her art, but couldn't tie that final knot, snip
the last strand. There was story yet to be told.

The cloth turned yellow as her hair turned white,
needle pinched by fingers worn to bone.
Still, she wove white stitches into another night.
What lies ahead for me when work is done?

I.

Bearer of blood and deep ancestral dirt, lineage
curly as a double helix.
A piece of a stranger tracked in
on the bottom of your shoe.
A piece of your dead daughter
still tangled in her brush.

Caput Medusae

The veins stand out bruise-blue, mapping your middle
like rivers. You were always your own world.
Here in the shadowless exam room,
the engorged vasculature of your abdomen, a word
scrawled from inside by someone
not you, is less surprising than the bare fact of your flesh.
My father's flesh: in a way, my own.
Everything is too close to the surface.
My ear against you, I would hear the blood hum.

Your dying liver has conjured a rebirth:
the veins you used in utero dilating after decades' dormancy,
bulging upward from the old umbilicus.
But the cirrhosis the doctor diagnoses as root
is only leaf: trace down the trunk
to evenings when you swayed home
in a sweet yeast fog, late and stoned,
to the mounting mercury above my head of voices, yours and
hers,
lobbed like Thor's thunder till our whole home rolled,
to you.

I could map deeper to your mother;
she gave you her blunt hands and her silence – it is her

umbilical vein which has groaned back to use
in you in its sixty-first year. The nest of its roots
sucks up from the ground, a woman's untamed hair
as she shuffles her head, surfacing from sleep.
It rustles into life like a vine, shy and slow
until you feel it choke your spleen.

The doctor is saying it is dangerous,
the filmy veins shunting the blood that could burst them,
and will. But their extravagance of strength!
Their craftiness goes undiagnosed, their brute will
to rip out a life again and again. Your liver failed, you let it,
but the body will not die, it snarls its teeth
and howls its gorgon head, it mounts an organ cage
to glut the hungry heart.

The doctor is evaluating eventualities
and I am brushing my father's angry hand
and while we look away, the venomous strands
are slithering north in spite of you and your failures;
they are loving you.

Myself

What to say to you,
my worst and oldest friend?
I slice your apples,
snap your hair back smooth into a ponytail,
tug the sheets up to your neck.
I cradle your dreams like eggshells,
blow cool air into the damp warm caves
behind your ears.
Sometimes I want to pull your nails out
one by one.

I wait inside you like a dead astronaut
sailing home for burial, a lone solemn passenger
in the great silences between the stars.

I was there at your first kiss,
failed test, little lies,
there when doubt held you awake
the night before,
there when the anesthesia
hummed you helpless.
I can crack you open to the world,
let your heart slide out like a yolk.
I can show all your teeth.

But oh, my self, sister, shadow,
treat me gentle,
learn me to love.