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## Rites: Poems

Lydia G. Brown  
*College of William and Mary*

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Rites: Poems

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement  
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in English from  
The College of William and Mary

by

Lydia Grace Brown

Accepted for \_\_\_\_\_  
(Honors, High Honors, Highest Honors)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Henry Hart

\_\_\_\_\_  
Nancy Schoenberger

\_\_\_\_\_  
Martha Alexander

\_\_\_\_\_  
Brian Hulse

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## Contents

### Acknowledgments

#### *I. Invocation, Muse*

Invocation...	5
Magian.....	6
Advice.....	7
Miniature....	8
Parsing.....	9
Rose.....	10
Myth.....	11
Vessel.....	12
Still Life....	13
Botanical...	14

#### *II. Journey and Transformation*

Humidity....	16
Reading John Bauer..	17
Opal.....	19
Opiate.....	20
Garden.....	21
Discovery...	22
Morning....	23
Crossing....	24
Two Worlds..	26
Exodus.....	27
The Fan District..	28
Pastoral....	29

#### *III. Ecstasis*

Cycles Perfecta.....	31
Arabesque.....	32
The Givens Bookstore Murals...	33
Genesis.....	34
Creative Evolution..	35

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## Invocation, Muse

*“For this beauty,  
beauty without strength,  
chokes out life” –H.D.*

*Invocation*

I do not trust my voice  
To speak from its molten core.  
It cools like fleshy ore  
In a human chest.

I am no point of clear quartz  
Or wall of unmoving hyacinths  
Guarding the greenhouse.  
My focus is not mathematical.

I will move this August air  
Like water or blood.  
My legs cry out to run.

I dig, plunging my hands in soil  
To shake the white iris,  
Pink peony, blue hydrangea,  
To pry open the rose  
Until all is red, red, red.

*Magian*

Cast off the mint leaf, uncut gravel, old dye  
In the old rug,  
And they become hymnal.

Stone half-circles line the hill.  
This is no place for magic  
Or deception.

Instead I can weave stems  
From a garden—  
Like alchemy—  
Into a cup of pure metal.

*Advice*

You tell me I should harden  
Into a red brick  
Or face of cold marble.

If I am hard,  
It is as a silver spoon  
In a glass of coffee,  
A chesspiece bishop's ivory crown.

Or I bend like the round white head  
Of a summer clover.  
I am no emperor;  
I have no rule over the swaying stems.  
If one breaks I will not scream.  
If one falls from my hand  
It will not hurt me.

The stem is as malleable  
As my skin.  
It could fall back just as easily as the others,  
Each in their ordered place.



*Miniature*

A face  
Not as white  
As a sink basin  
Or animated as the phantom  
Girls in white crepe,  
Dancing in May  
On the college lawn.

Above the asphalt hill,  
A great swath of birds  
Spirals above trees and roofs,  
Perching, then rising  
Like dark seeds shaken  
In water.

*Parsing*

1. Green water in a copper pipe  
Where the pressure exceeds the width.
2. A sheet of thin paper  
Wet, hanging vertically.  
I can't see around it  
And it won't dry.
3. Cold precipitated sugar  
At the bottom of a glass  
That clumps when I tilt it.
4. A synthetic-smelling candle  
Thickens the room.  
My furiously beating heart.
5. I ask a white dummy for answers.  
She follows me in silence,  
Denies me water to drink.  
Or presses hot lips to my ear,  
Repeats a muffled syllable, and, as I try to sleep,  
Walks ceaselessly up and down the stairs.

*Rose*

Bright face watching  
Through the shrubbery,  
I will uphold you.

Green eyes unblinking  
Reflect my shrunken shadow  
As I walk past;  
Classic lips  
Never show teeth.

Red hair  
Over your shoulders  
Rustles as I near  
To reach hands in the hedge,  
Pull out the overgrowth.  
You barely flinch—

Who are you  
Watching unmoving  
In the garden?

*Myth*

A woman  
Underwater, holding  
A mirror, promising  
Chaos when  
She surfaces, green eyes  
Obscured by gold hair.

The dark lake,  
You tell me,  
Is desire.  
Her bare skin repels  
Unless we sit at wooden desks  
On tiled floors, or anywhere  
Beyond black cliffs  
Claiming her as their moral.

*Vessel*

with the first line of H.D.'s "Magician" no. 5

I instill rest  
In a clay urn  
With handles,  
Bluish glazes  
My second and third skins,  
Impenetrable.

Venerable woman,  
I am the crystal goblet  
Heavy in a white hand  
And heavier full of water  
On a table.

Like a framed Rubens  
I am cold,  
As you see me.

I move by degrees  
In memory,  
Or, say, as wind bends  
Wild poppies,  
Petals blue and red.

*Still Life*

Tasting plump cherries, having nowhere to go  
Is enough to make you feel crazy.

Star anise floating in a cup of tea  
Recalls summer afternoons, home from the market,

Hoarding the unsold leftovers:  
Tiny packets of madeleines wrapped in cellophane.

Peeling an orange in idleness  
Is nothing like that earlier taste

Of orange-scented cake,  
Or after-work visions

Of the field's golden aster  
Which do not leave  
After irresolute sleep.

*Botanical*

With hawthorn stems, verdure  
Of what only a girl can understand,

A walk outside becomes deeper  
Than skin.

Bodies, like flowers,  
Are always points of analysis;

Flesh can always sacrifice its boundaries  
For the picturesque.

What information honeysuckle offers  
Is beyond me;

Why I pick it all for myself,  
I can't know.

## Journey and Transformation

*“And now I  
Foam to wheat, a glitter of seas”* –Sylvia Plath

*“O, to blot out this garden  
To forget, to find a new beauty  
in some terrible  
wind-tortured place.”* –H.D.



*Humidity*

Blue peaks jut into colossal knees  
And fall into green.  
I kick out my legs.  
Summer night, hear me hum—  
The dense dew vibrates.  
What physics is this  
Where the day winds in loops  
And thick branches pendulum back?

I am bigger than my body. I loom  
Taller than trees. I see myself,  
A small white shell  
Huddled under grass.  
“Who are you?” I ask from my height.  
“I can pick you away  
With my fingernail.”

My skin flakes off in blue scales  
Like shards of mica.  
I rise and rise,  
Swallowing green hills, expanding like heat  
And anything but new.

*Reading John Bauer*

1. Lena Dances with the Knight

Night air clumps to black.  
 If I join my hand with yours, stranger,  
 It is not with my fingers.  
 You lead me under damp leaves  
 In your absurd red pleats,  
 Your bizarre sleeves swaying.  
 I don't trust the dance you offer.

Brown spots flecked my white shoulders,  
 Knees, arms  
 When I was young.  
 My skin was immediate and personal.

Now my calves harden when I walk upstairs;  
 My back tightens with muscle.  
 I watch my body move in glass.

Outside, white flowers drop their heads into grass.  
 I edge my steps in front of yours  
 Beyond the gilded courts, the dances.  
 Our strides crystallize—  
 I want the upper hand.  
 The thick forest freezes.  
 Around us dark birds fall like knives.

2. Agneta and the Sea King

Again you show yourself, this time at the back of a church. Everyone kneels with their faces covered. Now I have to look at you, your naked body, your slumped shoulders and hanging head. I can't acknowledge you here, not when we pray. Forget our bodies and legs, but not your hips and our breath and our exacting mouths

3. Still, Tuvstarr sits and gazes down into the water

I see my child's face, my child's breasts  
Through unwashed hair.  
At twenty one, I can stand from my desk to buy liquor.  
My hair is longer, lighter,  
My thighs thinner.  
In my dream, I am an occupant  
Of a terrorized country.  
Cloaked children point at me with guns.

I cradle your head on my chest  
And fall asleep on the couch.  
You carry me on your back  
Up the wooden stairs of your parents' house,  
Sneak into my guest room,  
And kiss me in the safe quiet.

You offer me secrets lumped like ore in your perfect hands  
That I will keep.

*Opal*

Painted onto red paper stars  
Are shades of  
A white radiator,  
Blue painted staircase,  
Pink Victorian turret.

My brain yields in stopped time.  
Out spirals a paper lantern,  
A tunnel blue, now gold.

I crawl through,  
Sweeping with my palms  
For ephemera—  
Sketches, letters—  
Spying in the darkness facets  
Of a different kind.

Expecting paper,  
I pull something  
From a crack:

A jewel  
Rough, white,  
Infinitesimal.  
Glinting  
As it turns,  
Yellow, then blue.

*Opiate*

I wait  
For the stars to swim out  
Like most people.  
With a cup and book  
In either hand,  
I am a statue  
Holding talismans.

I burn with thirst,  
Begin to walk  
Beyond the room, window, door  
And onto the stone street.

Everyone dances.  
Lamps light crowded faces,  
Smooth stones  
On a long chain.

No one sees me.  
I am burning  
For water—  
I will find it here.

Is it here  
Behind long dresses,  
Under men's feet?  
Is it hidden in trees?

I will find it here:  
A stone basin and  
The drink it offers.

*Garden*

Down through  
Trampled clover, ragweed,  
Pink thistle, rose-pinks,  
Green stalks taller than trees are  
Footprints,  
Heels cut in new mud,  
Thick with urgency.

Someone has come before me,  
Hurrying to find  
The pink border.  
Did it break for you?  
Did it let you in?

I shield my face  
With fingers,  
Press an arm  
Through petals.  
Across, I smell  
Acrid ground, dust hurling  
Dust as vivid as sleep  
And as hurried as vision.

*Discovery*

In the center of  
The daisy field  
Is something you left--  
I came to find it.

In the jessamine,  
The yellow weeds is  
A heavy bulb  
Dug up like a giant pearl  
Or an onion.

When night is blue  
And quiet, I panic  
From the feel of ghosts.  
I kneel, fold my arms  
Into my body like petals,  
Protect what needs to be protected.

*Morning*

Drops of silver dew  
Line the stone path  
And the stone wall.  
Crepe myrtles open  
Like white stars.

I walk with something  
To bury, pressing  
My toes in the wet ground  
To find where the earth is softest.

There are no vines  
To hide behind,  
No trees for shelter.

I kneel, scrape up  
Soil with cupped hands.  
In my palms is a shattered bottle.

Let these shards of glass soften  
Under warm earth  
Like green pears.

A metal pail  
Strikes a metal trough  
And rings like an abbey bell.  
The early sun's shadows  
Are shapes of fathers, sisters.



*Crossing**“Empathy is a radical act.” –Sunil Yapa*

## I.

This is the hot time in spring  
 When seedpods fall from trees  
 And cracks break  
 The red earth.

I know a meeting place  
 By the stone wall  
 In the orchard  
 Where you can jump,  
 Where our crouching bodies  
 Will not be seen.

Pink blossoms thicken  
 To leaves—  
 If you run here,  
 I will find you.

## II.

We will run  
 To my old house,  
 Lie breathing under  
 Floorboards,  
 Listen to the others  
 Walk above us.

I see no sign  
 Of where you jumped.  
 The overgrown grass  
 Is as if you never came.  
 What can I do?  
 If I call  
 They will find us.  
 For someone to help you,  
 I pray—

## III.

To erase  
What you've seen and heard—  
The white dust,  
The suffocating ash,  
The screams.  
To undo what brought you here,  
To put me back  
To where I could still glimpse you  
Over the wall,  
Instead of in comfort,  
In silence,  
My shoes untied by the door.

*Two Worlds*

I find you  
Covered in pollen—  
Thin arms,  
Square jaw,  
Cocked chin—  
Inhuman girl  
Or imp  
Dusted in yellow.

You run  
Through tall grass,  
Covet the unreachable  
White weeds,  
Ripening strawberries  
By your ankles.

You are in control—  
You are not cruel—  
That tree to you  
In the thick  
Of the forest  
Is a door,  
These five violet petals  
Five voices  
Beckoning me  
To follow you  
To the other world.

Am I worthy of you?  
Your anger,  
Your grace,  
Your resolve.

Sometimes I can't  
See you, yet  
It is your song  
I hum under the moon.

*Exodus*

The gold rim  
Of your blue eye  
Is the border  
I want to cross.

I find you  
Where it is dark  
And damp.  
We rest  
Under new roots.

The sun is low  
For early May—  
Thin shadows follow us  
And berate us  
For leaving  
As we walk  
Past the blue irises.

Shrouded in leaves  
Of ancient oaks  
I can no longer hear  
Goldfinches singing  
Like I used to—

My eyes are wet  
As I ask you  
To find what's lost.

*The Fan District*

You know I never do things  
By halves.  
Late afternoon,  
Alone,  
I appraise gated yards,  
Cars littered  
With cherry blossoms  
Stalled like honey,  
Gilt wheels unspinning.

When we walk here together,  
Dreaming of our futures,  
I beg for the house  
Seeping of money, Georgian,  
Brick but no columns,  
No lacquer.

Tongue thick in my mouth  
From nectared air, I flinch  
At a sheet rolled off a  
Second-story porch to dry.

It waves in March air.  
I can only see it cut in pieces,  
Strands of kelp spread from a white hand.

*Pastoral*

Standing at the field's edge  
I turn my face from the wind,  
Ask, as spirals of gold hair  
Hit my jaw,  
When there will be sun.

Midday—  
The shadows have lost their sharpness.  
A broken stone on the dirt path  
Is a grey beetle.  
It hurries on stone legs  
To avoid my step.

A split branch cracks.  
It is as if  
My legs silhouetted  
Against the fence were different:  
A thrush's,  
Or better,  
A swan's.

## Ecstasis

*“Annul the self? I float it,  
A day lily in my wine.”* –Lisa Russ Spaar

*Cycles Perfecta*

Crowd poppies round my temples, deepen the inked line of my jaw, give me ornament. Perhaps now I am part of a Mucha triptych, red, bright, bronzed. To be young is no curse, but I crave old age, and I take my girlish flourishes—bergamot, frankincense, star thistle—with me. To be young is the kind of narcissism I enjoy. Fetishize my voice, distil my image into a green glass eye.



*Arabesque*

Pressure in lungs and sensing heart and liver stalling, I press palms damp with sweat to the window, heave it open. The night watch begins: among medicinal panic spreads a blue May sky of hammered metal, quivering, struck like a dulcimer. Annihilation is now out of the question: trembling does not repulse me like it used to, now facing the yard as deer vanish into dark trees.

*The Givens Bookstore Murals*

Here I resume the June Sabbath of teenage years: goldfish pond by the antique train painted red, maps of Virginia in glass cases, Alice with tea by Mrs. Ramsay. In the back, dimmer, old volumes crowd the tallest shelves: A History of England, engraved Longfellow, pocket Dickens. This is one place I cannot abstract—not the blue paint, sweat-stained cotton dress, sense of returning.

*Genesis*

Kneeling on the dock's edge at the Sweetbriar College boathouse, we peer into opaque water, dark, sun-warmed. Freshwater algae, waterweed, starwort clump to the surface, vanish after revealing themselves. To what biology are we privy when we sink legs in? When can we know where we are, and what grows there?

*Creative Evolution*

Each day greener than the last—in April I can say what I need to say, become what I need to become. Identities fall and hit one another like dominoes, or, more gracefully, like crowded dandelions bent forward by hot spring wind. This is how the body moves teeth: pressure on the ligament, adding cells of bone to one side, erasing them on the other. Such is the process of the self, changing without ceasing, made only of itself as bone is made only of bone. Ecstasis: now onto the next.