

The Good Girl is Always a Ghost

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Black
Lawrence
Press

To Brittany Arneson and Sarah Sweeney, real-life Wonder Women

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“In what way are you different? Are you saying there haven’t been artist women before? There haven’t been women who were independent? There haven’t been women who insisted on sexual freedom? I tell you, there is a great line of women stretching out behind you into the past, and you have to seek them out and find them in yourself and become conscious of them.”

—Doris Lessing, *The Golden Notebook*

I. STAGGERING BLOOMS

WOMAN KNIGHT OF MIRROR LAKE

For Qiu Jin

“Don’t tell me women are not the stuff of heroes.”

—Qiu Jin

Don’t tell me that mountains don’t form under our tongues and plunder
air,

our voices can’t clatter ears and force blindness into sight.

I’ll take the dagger into me before I’ll take a man.

In my sleep, the gauze turns my bound feet to concrete
and every step bashes the earth to wreckage, the cracked terrain

wrinkles into canyons and craters, hidden paths for my sisters to
follow.

My skin collects scars like wildflowers plucked from a garden,

the dirt writes and rewrites, and I welcome the collisions of fists
and knees and elbows, the dented metal armor, bruising a body

that never wanted shelter. When men speak of women, they
forget

how our bodies are the first map in which they became lost.

I lift the swords of the dead and drag them in my wake,
carving a bladed future in the dust, so lucid that I know—
they'll aim the blade at my voice. The sword is the last thing I'll
see.

ANNIE OAKLEY

Yes, I said it and I'd say it again: a woman should be just as comfortable cradling a gun as she is swaddling babes. Why? Because a woman can be trusted in ways men can't. I'm sharp—if I wanted to shoot the ash off a man's cigarette, I could. If I wanted to shoot off his head, I could do that too, but I'm a lady so I'd ask first. Not politely, just matter of factly. Those men sit around shuffling cards, placing bets on chance, but I can swipe their Ace of Spades, fling it in the air, show them the holes in their lives. Did you know when I began they put me in the circus? The circus! A woman with a gun is like a bearded lady or clown. And they did laugh, they squirmed in their seats a bit, especially men, but when women squealed it was only at realizing they could save themselves. I always said women should get their own brigades, that wars could be more effective that way—tempered with good sense and empathy and wit, and let me tell you: when a woman's pissed her aim is *perfect*. We don't falter, not like those lizard-skinned lawmen shedding chunks of scales every which way and not like those teenage pimple pocked soldiers who come back, spirit broken or deranged. I tell you we could do it. I'm not just a Wild West show. I married a man but I birthed nothing but bullets.

INDIRA GANDHI SPEAKS TO NIXON

It's unpleasant, talking to men about war—
like a visit to the gynecologist, when you want
to ask, *Is there a woman I may speak to about these matters?*

But I am stuck with him, quipping about
the gray streaks in my hair, joking
about Frankenstein's bride, and I say, yes,
Mr. President, I was not made by God:
a political woman is always made by man.
Don't think I don't know what a man like him
says about me behind closed doors.

He'll call me a witch, maybe worse,
but witch is my favorite. If only
I had such power—I'd curse them,
give them all vaginas and let them fumble
as they try to rule with such a handicap.

To see Nixon in a dress, his looks under careful
scrutiny, what a fantasy. I admit it,
this is what I think of every time
we meet. I stare at the wall and imagine
Nixon painstakingly applying lipstick
to meet with me and I think,

Not this old hag again, nagging about Russia.

It's a shame we have to run the world this way,
under the fists of men with egos so frail
they start a war. Nixon will call me
a cunning fox, he'll say I suckered him again,
but we're both cursed: he'll ruin himself,
I'll rely on men to protect me from ruin,
and we know how that ends for a woman.
And when the men who loved me grieve

my death, they'll shed blood and not tears.
I scribble in my notebook, never meeting his stare,
and his voice finally stops, waiting
for me to fawn at him, and I look up:
How much longer must we speak, sir?

THE HILTON CONJOINED TWINS

Beauty isn't pain, as they always told us.
Pain is pain. We longed for the man swallowing
fire, doodled his last name in our diaries,
and when our bodies blossomed, every man
we beckoned with our bouquet of fingers was him,
snuffing out the flame in his stomach,
pulling it back reignited—men
were nothing short of magic,
and we dreamed ourselves into a double dip
strawberry cone. Beauty isn't pain.
We looked so delicious
in our plump, starched petticoats,
a giant cupcake, two dollops
of frosting on top in the shape of bows.
Later, the smudged black eyeliner,
the flapper girl fringe, the knee-high boots—
two bad girls in cahoots, whispering
and waltzing behind whorls of smoke.
We sang of heartache with shrill, trilling
chickadee notes but didn't know the first thing
about loneliness. It was all an act:
children begged for pictures, men demanded
we lift our skirts, show precisely where we're glued.
Only pain is pain: the steep bank of skin
between hip bones, our four tangled legs, gliding
into spotlights double-wide and innocent eyed.
And curtsying—the tent trembled and purred
with applause. Beauty is not pain.
We tried to marry, but every judge called us indecent,
incestuous. Secretly, they wanted to watch us:

who could condemn a threesome forced
by God? When the curtains fell, when our manager
ran off with our money, when the drive-in
movies replaced the stage, only then
did we daydream about cuts—when one
would slice her finger on the grocery bags at work,
we'd look at each other in awe. It could be so gentle,
a swift slice of skin. Scalpels dangled over our sleep
like baby mobiles over a crib, metal clangs
soothing us to sleep. When one of us starts
to vomit, the other sings jazz:
The show is over. The curtain is descending.
We know that when one of us dies,
the other will bear her like an anchor
until she pulls us both under.

BETTIE PAGE AND THE WISDOM OF OLD AGE

The world's worst sin is shame,
and the punishment for it is women.
God didn't tell Eve to hate her body—

He gave her air baths in Eden, a figure
that undulates like a river. I know
girls are trying to recreate me;

I've seen them in the magazines, backlit
by men's craving. I know the ways
they deflated to bones, the forced withering

from girl to good girl. The punishment
for shame is us: we torment men
as our hour glass curves expire.

They need us so they want to see us
bound and gagged. They love us
so much they have to kill us. I know

the click of a camera is the same
language of the fist, the beating tempo
as you strip and pose, the skin's petals

unfurl submissively for every flash.

Young Betties, turn your wrists
to the lens, reveal the map

of your blue veins, stun
with your pulsing defiance, refuse
the shame that wants you tamed.

Now that I'm near death, I can
tell you how the six men pinned
me to the concrete, and I knew

enough to say *harder*. I can
tell you that my daddy's name is a cut
in my cheek that reopens

with every forced smile. Once,
there was a boy who loved to see
me gagged and he died from watching.

On my wedding night, my husband
wrapped his hands around my neck
and said he'd finish me for good,

but God intervened. And then God
and the Devil never let me rest,
fighting over the damned in my earshot—

even a mythical man is still a man.
Don't listen to the lessons for the good
girls: have no shame, ignore

the posture poses, the arrangements
of fine china, the curtsies, the closed knees.
Learn the body's trapdoors, how

to make steam rise from your eyes,
that even your spine's arch is a flirt,
and that love is impossible

with the heart of a girl next door—
it's temporary, like a child's tooth,
its root will weaken: it'll be swallowed

or spat out. My body vanished and will soon
vanish again. The good girl is always a ghost,
and her body is always a gash.

“DIEGO AND I” (FRIDA KAHLO, 1949)

My love for Diego is as deformed
as my spine. I'd like to say it holds
me up, stirs the doughy batter
of my body into a cyclone
of a woman taunting a man
with her full skirt and Jarabe dance.
No, it's a crushed and crooked thing
I can't live without. I've always been a bitch.
I've always been a painter.
Diego made me better at both.
Every time he touches me, he knows
my body is a desert, my feverish skin,
my landscape, fine sand
that grows nothing, but still
he toils, and I baptize
our babies in my blood.
Do you know what it is to love a man
who can turn a wall into sky,
who can make a heart into a wall?
My paintings are not transformative—
there's nothing surreal in them.
Diego is inked on my skin.
Diego is my third eye.
Diego's third eye is an eye
that wanders like his other
two eyes. And Diego makes
me so female that my hair grows
into a noose. Like a man,
he watches. Like a man, he needs
his hands to kill me. Like a man,

he can set my body aflame
without a match, crush me
into pieces like a puzzle, like the trolleybus
did, my first accident. And Diego,
my second, who hammers nails
into my joints and I split open
like a cadaver on an autopsy table.
This is as real as it gets.

MAE WEST INSTRUCTS HOW NOT TO LOVE

Look away from the platinum crown;
it's not a message. It doesn't say
I'm the "come upstairs for a good time" gal.
It doesn't smell of strawberries
left in a kitchen sink; you don't need
to hover over me like fruit flies
or dance yourself into a frenzy
around a streetlamp. Keep that up
and I'll love you the way wet hair clings
to a girl after a hot bath—a little cold
and brittle by morning.
You don't need to hold me
like a spiked punch bowl ready
to splash onto your pristine carpet.
Don't ogle me like nipple tassels
you confuse for fireworks
in a bourbon blur—
if you keep looking at me like that,
I can only take you like a bullet.
I'm not a woman like the rest,
but I'm a woman nonetheless.
Love me right, and I'll love you
more than my pen as it pours
across the page characters
so brazen that I can hear
the censors' black pens snuffing
out every breath. I'll love you
like the cross-dresser loves makeup,

loves the blisters that heels leave on his toes.
I'll love you with the tenderness
two women take to bed
when they can sneak away
from their husbands and kids. I'll love
you like the pianist can't admit
he loves the out-of-tune key—
how he learns to make it work
in a song, how he never gets over
the surprise of it not sounding
exactly how it should.