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Hilleary Gramling

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Siren

by

Hilleary Gramling

Jericho Brown

Adviser

Creative Writing/English

Jericho Brown

Adviser

Jim Grimsley

Committee Member

Lisa Lee

Committee Member

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Abstract

Siren

By Hilleary Gramling

Siren is a collection of poems that examines the physical and psychological effects of trauma and its connection to human relationships, gender, religion, body image, sexual and physical abuse, death, self-harm, suicide, depression, and ultimately reclamation. The narrative is driven by a singular female voice as she navigates her emotional experiences in the aftermath of personal trauma. Her voice is simultaneously polyphonic, magnified to reflect the greater, more collective question of what happens after tragedy. Focused on how “the self” is shaped, compelled and altered by tragedy, the thematic content of the collection is mirrored by its formal elements. As the poems weave between past and present, short free verse propels the narrative forward while prose-like elements halt that motion to create engagement with a specific moment. As the speaker’s consciousness waxes and wanes between reflection of past abuse and ownership of the present, so too do the poems, illuminating the complicated intersection of pain and love. Balancing direct, truncated poetic styles with lyric to cultivate a work that is both raw and resolved, Siren is at once a reflection on and resistance to the cycles that perpetuate trauma. It is a call, drawing attention to the nuances of personal anguish and the possibility of the transformation of the self.

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Moon

There is a time
in the night
when you love me,
or don't
outwardly
thrust through
my bedroom like
the sun through a window,
morning come too soon.
I know your desire
of me, a slow pull
from whole to half,
a sliver, thinned
and sliced.

Window

Make me a window.

If you carve me into the wall,
then rip me open from the middle.

Halve me horizontally. Make me
a transparent hue to allow light to pass
through me to you. Rap on my glass
and open me every Sunday
with your morning paper,
make me easy, make me object,
make me open, never close.

Gray

I hold your face
between my palms
my thumbs to your brows.
I grasp tightly—
your jaded eyes
staring past mine.
Are your eyes green
or blue? I am unsure.
They could be pools
stilled by winter or
water sloshing over
itself to fill the space
left by a hand.
You look past
me: absence
is almost gray.

Yesterday

I waited for you
to breathe heat
upon my skin
or light
a tongue
in my mouth.

The body
is familiar
with your ash.

You looked past me.
I am not burning.

Show

You keep me waiting on my couch
staring, an amber square of light against my face,
the television on but my eyes
closed to the room, the day's heat
hanging heavy on my skin like a sweater
I do not want to wear, like your weight
upon me. I want you to get here,
pull up and into my driveway
then closer between my thighs,
my back slick and familiar against the leather,
your weight upon me, your weight leaving me—
the morning never heals what the night ruins
when you come, if you will come.

Treasure Island, Florida

To occur
is a word
that does not
mean to be.

It is transient:
with a beginning
and an end.
It looks

blues and grays,
a whitecap in a storm
before it quickly breaks.
Although it is right

to say
I am occurring,
it is wrong
to say I am being.

If I am being
there is no end
to June. I am never-
ending. I become

singular, settled in place,
bound within myself.
A wave frozen
as it crests.

An occurrence happens
once then, ends.
A being lives
before it can die.

Sin

I let you
I let your hands
I imagine they are the hands of God,
their sanctuary around a chalice.
Choke me,
it flows from my lips
hot wax
from a candle.
Oh God,
and you do.

I call upon my creator
my skin blossoms
blue—

Product

When I look down at the racks and racks of fruit, up at the mirrors, my image reproduced over and over amidst the bulbous, over-saturated blueberries and bristling red tomatoes, the oranges hiding their pulp and the lettuce, sharp, green and tasteless, I think of death. There are always fluorescent lights and they violate the whites of my eyes. The fish. The meat. The red-pink of ribbed flesh cut away from the chest, cut from the thigh. The fish, gilled and glistening sometimes untouched. Their grisaille eyes unseeing like opaque marbles. The chop of the butcher cutting me a slice to taste. I want to eat the end when it's fresh. He knows this and when I catch him in a good mood he pulls me behind the counter.

Moment

When you poke
me in the eye and hot
purple spots invade
my retinas, I picture you:
dirty knees, not the bones,
but the peachy flesh hairs,
the green and blue
bruise you gave yourself,
and this moment, in which
I squirm under your fingertip,
squeals escaping my lips,
I almost forget
your violence.

Cotton

You take a drag
of your cigarette
its wisps shrouding
your face in a gossamer film.

You lean inward
and put that cigarette out
on my arm.

I do not fear the burn
but that I like it—
the way you press
resolutely. My skin
melts hot into itself,
reminds me of
you melting into me
or you melting
into yourself
when you pull
away from me,
pull a shirt over
your shoulders after sex,
cotton closing around
your ribs softer
than I could ever be.

Garden

After another fight, I go down
to the beach to walk while you sleep.
I think of your mother's funeral,
how they laid the body, arms folded,
no subtle smile, no relief.
Her face was like a cameo, tucked into
its precious amber silk. Safe

keeping. Who is keeping her? She came into the world
out of the blackness, the Orphic shore, the place
where time spans the blink of a lashed human eye.
Birth induces amnesia so we forget the garden.

Now that she is gone, does she remember?
Souls are like lost car keys or bobby pins or
lovers, caught in the folds of the beach,
the orchard further inland.

I picture you asleep and wonder
if in death you will forget your violence.

Dinner

Standing on the porch,
I watched you
climb into your driver's seat,
shut the door.
Which was easier: leaving
or being left?

Three years now
and I still can't decide.
You shut the door
and pulled away.

This evening, as the day dims
and the night opens in front of me,
I step outside to digest—
the food, heat on my breath.

I see a stray pissing in the street.
I remember the animal in you.

Loop

My psychiatrist calls it a loop
when you get stuck and you can
not let go. I think I am in a loop
right now I think in a loop in a loop

as we speak. I don't leave the house
until my bed is made, my teeth
brushed, my medication swallowed
in that order in that order in that

sometimes I forget if I locked the door
and I go back, counting the stairs
by even numbers two, four,
did I lock the door? Lock the door? Lock

everything in twos. I see my door
in everything. The locks in the city
and the classrooms, shining or
shadow-clad. The locks

with their four corners, little metal
holes with only one key for each,
turn to the right twice to lock, one key,
one lock, my key for my lock, my

time stretches as I count the doors,
the steps, the stairs and the locks
look at me, one black eye, watching
like my mother does. My mother, my

counting reminds me again, did I
forget to lock, forget to look,
forgive a betrayal, forgo a caregiver,
remember did I lock the door?

Dear Mother,

I never thought I would speak to you candidly this way but this time I think you can hear me like a friend would if we were going for coffee on a Sunday in the morning when eating is easy and there is no need to count: the food, the numbers, the fat, the weight.

I know when I say the word "count" you think of calories too. Like friends do, we would hug and drink our coffees.

We'd forget about dirty dishes.

We'd forget about our daughters' wrists, boney as bat claws.

Hospital

The moon is my mother.
She looks over my shoulder,
reflected in the indigo waves crashing
before me: a thin, white gash made with a scythe.
The clouds roll in carelessly from the south
without direction, spreading above me
like a gossamer dress and I pray
to her, to them, beseeching
to transform as they do
without disappearing.

Aerial

My mother opens the broken shutters
of my bedroom window with one hand,
the same that strokes my cheek,
while I pretend to sleep soundly.
She touches my face but cannot see

me, hours before naked in a closet
peering down at what I thought
was a cathedral, domed like Saint Chappelle,
now a ruin, and me an onlooker,
a third spirit, neither body nor soul,
but an unwanted witness of the downfall,
the Judas Priest who came against me.

When I do open my eyes, she has closed the shutters:
still enough light to see between my thighs.

Red

I.

I learned what woman meant
when I was fifteen. I wept
blood from between my thighs,
Pandora's box, a deep black hole
and my mother's look at me.

II.

When that first man
took off my clothes, he pressed
a wad of tissues into my palm.
I asked him why. He shushed me
and told me not to cry. I stared
up at the white ceiling fan, turning.

III.

Years later came the rape. Bruises blooming
in a dark closet, red cups strewn
about like reminders.

IV.

Today, a man locks me into a room,
his back turned, the sharp click of the lock
like the chop of a guillotine's blade.
O Antigone, Dear Anne Boleyn,
Mary Turner, Malala Yousafzai,
Sweet Marie Antoinette, Hatshepsut.

I make myself, cut
three gaping red wounds.

Retrospective

Here is what I know:

There is a world war against my body,
its lumps, its curves, its deepness,
the dark-pink parts
like symbols of weakness.
My body is a revolution.

Here is what I won't know:

When my clothes became consent.
Why some wounds have to be cut open
so they can heal. Why?

To tell my story is to tell her story.
To tell my story is to hurt.

Reverse

Help me reverse, regurgitate
the liquor that burned inside my throat.

Erase the blue-bruised blossoms
covering my legs.

Pick my clothes off the floor
and sew the rips whole.

Let me grab the heavy hands
that drew my tight thighs apart.

Let his fingernails be dirt-filled,
from hands I've never seen before.

Core

I.

After falling asleep I woke,
my arms felt foreign,
the body, alien.

I looked inside myself
searching for worship.
Is there a God here?
Speak up or forever
hold both pieces of me, one
for each palm.

II.

My friend tried to commit suicide last week and another cannot forget her rape. One more will not stop cutting herself. When I tell you I am tired of being a woman, I mean I am tired of knowing history. I mean that when I see her cuts and mine, I know that each is a response. If I ever tell you about my pain, it is because there is nothing left to talk about. I mean I was handed the razors, the glass, the scissors.

III.

When I reach,
desperately grabbing
for the swinging straps,
I feel my body at the core
of the Earth, the hot center.
I get off the subway,
wondering, if I am the only
one who sees a noose
for every neck.

Vase

It splintered
at first then
satisfyingly shattered.
Still, there is a vase
in front of me, if only
the outline
in crystalline
ruins puddled
at my feet.
I only
want to look
at the empty
space on the windowsill,
but the shards
sing out.
They want a taste
of blood.

Halved

I punch a mirror, fracturing silver.
The blood leaks from my fingers,
proof of all the selves let free,
each silvered shard one of me
yet none of me now.
The genesis of my body
through violence, the removal
of excess viscera. I cut away
to emerge wet from wreckage.
Every time I fuck I can feel
part of me dying. I've been halved
and then halved again, silver slivers
sliced away. The mirror is my body
but you are the fist. I pray for you.

Kneel

How do you sleep
when you feel sick?
You might throw up
his last words
if you tried to speak them
out loud to the dark.
You close your eyes
expecting blackness
but get his violet silhouette
beneath your lids.
You wake up
in winter and walk
past a lily, starved
by the cold,
translucent and twisting
unto itself. You
kneel and pick it up:
scrape the damp
snow-soaked earth,
your hands trembling like two
clipped wings.
You kneel and take it,
hold it in your hands
with its pruned petals veined
and parched.
You're awake now.

Homecoming

I walk my beach and evening light
is the color of an orange as it dies—

When pain leads me
to the same place, I call it habit.

Habits should be broken, but I wait
for the moment of stillness,

like the top of an arc made by a wave,
bringing an orange to the shore

as the blue water crashes at my feet.
The light darkens with the night.

The orange is made of blackened rot
and in my hands, it comes apart.

Pearls

I refused sleep because there were men
dredging the beach outside my window.
Large lights shined their florescence
on the sand casting shadows,
the blackened swirling water
churned up and thrown into the air
in a constant stream of renewal.
The men worked for hours with their machines,
great hulking metallic masses,
commanding the shores at will.
Man can be like God manipulating, shape-
shifting what isn't his but what has become
derivative of his creation.

If I could suck out the black swirling waters
of myself and churn them through the air
like dark glinting fountains, I would
from that, present to God dark-red gifts:
antique un-halved geodes
or sharp edged oysters.

He cracks them open with a knife,
ready to cast his judgment.

Origin

I am the origin of the universe,
split open over many moons
and pieced out to be shared,
a public offering:
these breasts, this body,
divvied, a cemetery.

The men I wanted
and those I did not, their memories
are mine. I bury them deep
under the earth; their roots
growing into the dirt,
blossoming silently
underneath a single headstone.