

The Anger



Poems

Katherine Davis

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The Anger Poems

i.

I am a wandering survivor,
Kicking through piles of red leaves,
Which fly up to kindle my hair on fire,
Women's anger, demonic halo, fallen angel
Who pipes, "I don't care," "Leave me alone,"
"All's ridiculous." Pain, an eye stuck with needles.
I pluck one out — offer it to you to attempt the kingdom,
But even thin, in gingham and khakis, you can't pass.
I am a scythe at the door, guard against interlopers who
Don't tell the whole truth. Life is short; get to the point.
Honor is black-and-white instructions, a scientific plate
Superior to a saving grace, computer more functional
Than reticent flesh and blood. Spools of information more
Powerful than martyrs, who go to death without a moan.

Rawly difficult, I am a barbarian dancing around a kettle,
Boiling in the wilderness. I vomit my barbaric grunts far—
Into middle class neighborhoods of sedatives, sirloin,
SUVs, scooters, yipping dogs off leash. I too maul and
Bark, search for sticks, crabapples, four-leaf clovers,
Shrews, frogs, to add to my bouillabaisse. To stay alive,
I will devour the cooked, avoid the pond where outcasts are
Dunked. I lift my chest free of plank and stones, bray
Like a donkey unwilling to be moved, even when whipped.

iii.

My emotions are back—Yorkshire pudding to a starving man.
Hand over hand I lift gooey dough to my mouth. There can never
Be enough butter to fill my gut. My ribs stick; I play them like
A xylophone—syncopated song of a freed bird. Goodbye rusted
Cage, how I clawed the bars! I fought having my wings clipped,
And now I furiously soar, beyond the rooftops, beyond the smoke.
I rise, incarnate, incarnadine, out of a magician's hat black trap,
Dove signalling a bloody battle never lost.

I emerge from the maze with a string fastened to my navel,
Pulled to a newly born brain, monstrously electrified, not by kite
And lightning, but by gut instinct, maternal writing, vindication
Of rights never before spoken. Let me wander from spring
Fields to polar ice caps. I pick at purpose like tightened fingers
Around an enemy's throat. Black and blue, my mark: I settle
For livid wounds, screwy prints which no lawman could decipher.

v.

My mind flashes, errant neon sign on a rundown storefront
Advertising All Beef Franks and Hot Coffee, Slurpees the color
Of sunny ocean, in cold, dark, upstate New York.
May I become female priest to absolve me of thought,
Bless my brain into winter sleep, cover of snow and down,
Marriage in a chapel illuminated with glass saints,
Dressed in emerald gowns, presenting rosebud hair and lips.
In dreams I love but wake to hate, anger, poisonous kiss,
Which I would give to men who violate women, so-called
Scholars who live by mottoes and generalizations, who don't
Exercise their ears or the atrophied cells in between.

Abandon me, gods of death and thunder, float into your realm,
Aeron chairs, oak desks, tastefully framed art prints.
Leave me to lap the scummy pond, peer into the mailbox
Filled with flyers, rake leaves, sweep crumbs from the maws
Of mice. I reconcile myself to lowly life, the dirty Subaru,
Muddy boot, bison in the preserve, rolling in dust.
Give me the stale Oreo, soft banana, peanuts which make
Me burp. I'll use indigestion as inspiration, ginger pill
On my tongue, anti-nausea for the world's wrongs.

vii.

I will forgive the stark ground of this pain, transform it
To an island beach where I live by golden staff, crown
Mounted by ambergris. For I have dived to the belly
Of the beast, scraped hide thin of fat. Bully for this bullion
Of a living thing. Come refresh in waves, inhabit my
Magic circle, sand dotting your feet like diamond dust.
I can make this palm tree a palace, this coconut, head
Of a simian friend. Drink the silver elixirs I stir; they will
Protect you from night terrors. For your body, a single
Orange capsule, vapor of cloud and mountain, harvest moon
Crisp with vegetable dust. Wise guardian, stranded,
I have turned rote memory into charm.

For exercise, I suppress my speech. Instead I walk fast
As flecks of foam and spit bubble up out of my throat.
My lungs clog with four-lettered phlegm. Acid invective
Dissolves four-leaf clovers, withers the chrysanthemum
In the pleasant pot. I am rot, poisonous fungi, scourge of
Carefully kept grass. May my kind flourish, race of crooked
Mailboxes stuffed with the junked and superfluous, addressing each
Recipient, singling out the anonymous resident.

Her Science

My Science

I am growing into my science,
Like a blind man moving forward
In a dust storm, chemical formula
For a fixed happiness, lab rat
Given anaesthetic before electrode
Or scalpel. On my wheel in a cage
I amaze the doctors who inject me
With toxins, my fur sleek miracle,
My fat disproving a hypothesis
Of waste. I am not a disease
But a collection of pills like pebbles
And seashells, like trees in an exotic
Forest, orange capsule, blue diamond,
White oval, pink lozenge. Water magicks
Them into beneficial reaction, banishes
Gloom, instills calm, a pond shuttered in
Fall leaves. I grow well through intervention
Of guesswork and brainiacs, persistence
A function of being desperate to live.
No human fully understands desire nurtured
Through science, plankton under microscope,
Fantastical miniature, xylem and phloem,
A plant's nervous system. I take a wafer
Under my tongue and swallow. Between

My synapses, a chill like a river, turquoise
Inkling, peace of stepping stones in a pool.
I am a test tube to cure the world, blossoming
Like rock crystal, genie bursting a bottle,
Frog spreadeagled to be cut under goggles,
Revelation of the most intimate mysteries.

Testament

Are you a candle or a chalice? A dancer
Wrapped in organ and white gauze, feet
Arched below the gothic of a cathedral
Cancer, babe in arms, unfit to be deposited
At the altar steps, rug red as fury, as erupted
Fat and muscle, heart, lung, breast, saints,
Nodes in lymph bathed in benediction,
Christened into suffering. You shamefully
Rub ash and oil off your forehead as if
Caretaker of your flesh, but you are a decrepit
Tenant, begging, burning, puckering into sweat.
The faithful look askance as their weekly tithe
Puts roast and potatoes on the priests' table.
The holy have healthy bellies. They fill their plates.

The Reversal

(with a debt to Lorca)

The gods drafted me as a protagonist
Of a story told backwards; at fourteen,
Gave me a destination: infinity's island,
Evening's bramble, unending and frantic,
Stone roof dropped on a butterfly. My body
Spread like a ruined sky, polluted and sliced
By medicine's jet engine, armed scientists
In bomber jackets arguing in jargon my prospects
For survival, heartless as statistical tables,
While my origin slumped in an armchair and cried
Past exhaustion and ache. But I saw distantly
A bonfire burning a clearing in time, and in dreams,
I raced for it, a future blazing a forest of clocks,
All chiming hours that were no friendly allies.

The Wreck

My body is a shipwreck,
God a fiddler on the deck
As it sinks and breaks.
On the shore, looters wait
For sodden ribbons, hats,
Gowns-a-mess, a manuscript
Never to be seen except snatched
In scraps. What infamy I embraced
In Europe! My Italian lover too
Is drowned. On the American coast,
My dreams founder, awash in
Bracken. Silence but for waves,
Sand beyond my lips. Ripping
The night, thieves cast nets,
Flounder toward my riches.
The tide pulses in my throat.
Nature, sole survivor, sings its songs,
In and out of my lungs.
The moon is full, and God,
When He tires, will fly to a mountain
To overlook the fate He endorsed,
Signature on yet another crumpled form,
Scrawl across my bloodless torso.

Lymphoma, Age 14

The pace changed in ninth grade.
Some boy had shot your collarbone
With his collection of marbles. The colors
Were obscure. Only surgeons saw them.
Even the agates weren't given in a bottle.

Next were the scans for dark matter.
You were dumb. Didn't ask to see them.
Hell, you were frightened of mutant devils,
Toy soldiers in the war against you.

Caught with their hands up, some confessed
Their name and rank—a starting point
For a chemical arsenal. Killing enemies
Plus women and children. Your survival.

O bitter taste, and terrible parachute.
You marched off the plane like a winner,
But the sweat stank in your boots.

Be sick like a grown man. Run through
The rancid acid, the souvenir teeth
On a chain bouncing on your chest.
Easy enough to pull out of gaping

Mouths that you pity as you pass.

Don't mumble: shout your prayers!

Private pain is useless as foggy goggles.

Gases from your lungs swirl into the general.

Stateside, no one wants to hear.

You are alone in silent panic.

Your loved ones must be relieved,

But they don't speak for fear.

So the pace picks up. What God

Maximizes the trial course?

Your heart bolts, quickened

By the volatility of battle.

The Red Case

Your red case contains
A fox who will snatch
You off his back, devour
You like sodden grapes—
Animal satiety which
Drips from a sugar IV.

It could have been
Revlon's cameo:
Concealer, pancake,
Rouge, lipstick, mirror.
Daily making of
An actress playing
The same stained dress.
Soft slanted applicators
Bent to hand, a tin full
Of Q-tips for fine finishes.
The spotlight shines,
But it's no sweat.

The case also grips
A vial of urine, bloody
From chemical toxins,
Massage tools
To out the stress,

And postcards of mt. peaks:
It's only fresh snowfall
Which abates the nausea.
You think of drawers of clothes
That your mother must take home
If you don't accompany.
We love you, the sign says.
Forget all else the red case
May embrace. The blank-eyed
Masquerade of misery. Fold it;
The sign will fit, corner,
Crevice, a family's wish.
Red case lined with black,
Then gray, then pink.

Remission Solo

Your chart reads "Cancer Free." Go into the sunlight
From the basement, X-ray shielded, consulting room.
Fasten your tap shoes and dance up Freeway Park,
Red flowers blossoming, yet not infecting your blood,
Only healed scars and terrible shaking within.
Again, an exterior exists, freed from the trap of skin.
The Bon Marche keeps its scarves and wigs,
Charity Cupboard comes tomorrow to repossess
The dish drainer, the kitchen utensils. The apartment
In Medical City will empty. You will return to a double-
Mortgaged future. But now, on the stairs over the road,
You walk on your hands, up a railing. Bystanders cheer.
You shrug off flop sweat, willing wonder to persist.
A persistent itch to live.
Dogs frolic despite tight leashes.
A capuchin monkey accompanies on the squeezebox.
Kids release silver helium balloons, get-well wishes sent
Around the world. In the distance, seals of Puget Sound.
The lady from the Society arrives to shake your hand,
Free of IV, of plastic identity. Your survival, colossus of science,
Product of strident chemo gods.

Dear Bastards

Dear Bastards

Men estranged me from my mind and body, slammed
Me, toddling, with a stone slab of the Ten Commandments,
Sucked off my tears with a vacuum pump, enrolled me in
Ignorance contests, where I was drugged and posed in
A red bikini, answering trivia questions while roller skating.
But the lipstick around my mouth stuttered a jagged pink,
My breasts sank, my hair was greasy. Useless competing
Against other women, I was made to stand naked as an
Anatomical model, while doctors lectured bunches of aspiring
Residents, all generalizations based on the study of the patriarchal.
Informed repeatedly my feelings were impossible, I burrowed under
My skin, bathed in oxygenated blood, vital energy, constructed
An interior palace until I was old and learned and far away from
Despots, to conquer a cold mountain, dig foundations deep in rock,
Erect a monument to all I have become, despite, because, one
Rational, compassionate heart, hero of confrontation and affront.

Manifesto

Was I created to be abused? Saints and saviors suffered for others'
Good, love, like arrows through tense muscle, nails through palms,
A scissored-out tongue, gouged eyes. I obliged for a while, stayed in
hiding,
Swallowed a dozen humiliations, locked my misery in a sweltering
Room, wore the uniform of obedience, struggled to master any sign
Of weakness. But the practices of submission are fatal. I felt silence
Like a tumor invading my gut and lungs, obliterating bulge, concession
To all damn people of power. So, I forged a resistance army of one,
A church in which I believed myself, a bower of trees under which I
Schemed a runaway freedom. Someday, I would remove my body
From the touch of oppressors, the stirrups and ladders that I shrink
myself
Into to gain some fool approval. I found my own destiny in dissent—
On behalf of all girls, an eternal no, while privately I sowed rows of yes.

So There

Gentlemen: you are responsible for what you damage.
Even your subtle hand gestures have knocked porcelain rabbits
Off their shelves, split beeswax candles, shattered mugs.
Your coldness has solidified the maple syrup, frosted stained
Glass birds, withered decorative shrubs into stale potpourri.
Teas and bath salts become sodden with all that intellectual
Humidity. But I don't fear. I repair all in my laboratory, hands
Shrugging off inflammatory pain, eyes focusing despite miasma
Brought on by allergies. You can't crush me: I know your mothers'
Maiden names, your first lovers, addresses, and pets, the last
Four digits of your social security numbers. Remain ignorant;
I will be rich off your half-assed work, your provincial stipends,
Malpractice insurances, my well-being guaranteed despite your
Slop, your casual brutality, your indifference toward common good.

The Move Beyond

I used to live an imaginary life, creating myself in the mind
Of others, dancing star always seen and followed, polar bear
Wandering from broken bars of the zoo, caped crusader
Capable of flight shouting scabrous jokes, daring ripostes
To tortured arguments of small minds. I was an actor in a secret
Theatre, always modeling new wigs and costumes, accents as if
I knew a greater world, not just a parochial schoolyard, the quiet roads
Of a poor town. But I pulled my shit together, loaded a van, moved out.
Divorced from anything familiar, I was better off, no head but my own.
I channelled my imagination not toward fantasy but toward a real
track:

Research and intelligence dispelling heresies, my own perpetual truth.

The Sharpener

Perhaps I used to imagine that silence was eloquent, trace
Of a skating blade in compulsory figures, always sticking
To requirements, perfect obedience to the predetermined.
But my body always wanted the split, the backflip, illegal
Twizzle, as my short skirt flipped around my hips, makeup
Sweated off my face, glitter and sequins flung like forest
Needles, until I was skin in the dance, girl translated into an
Impossible axel. Stay away from me, wielders of
Scores and technicalities, those who prize some
Slender femininity, grace like a fleshless arabesque,
A spin into invisible infinity. Let me be butt, knee,
Palms scraped against clear crystals. I am inevitable
As gravity, soiled from all my bloody labors, always
Improvised resistance, coach, designer, sharpener.

My Sacrifice

Truth is a bone and a flower, raw, unhallowed,
The bone picked clean by animals, the ruthless
Coyotes, the keen-eyed vultures, circling, tearing,
Until what is human is barely recognizable, but it is
Offered, like the flower, modest and peeling, shedding
Color into bare structure, undeniable evidence of struggle,
Stark with a bit of beauty for slight palatability, concession
To blood, a love which endures beyond any punishment.
So the altar lacks a cloth, candelabra, lilies like virgins,
A celebrant in gold and silver, intoning in Latin or chant.
What you have is a battered dresser, stuffed with outmoded
Memories, scarred by cigarette burns, littered with broken
Ballerinas and piled with journals red with pain and fury.
Gaze and let rote prayer depart. Drop your arms. Grunt and
Bark, howl and yawp: I myself am beyond wailing.

About the Author

Katherine Davis is a feminist poet living in Edmonton, Alberta. She earned a Ph.D. specializing in American poetry from Duke University. Her poems have previously appeared in *Weber*, *Stepping Stones*, *Wild Goose Review*, *Convergence*, *Sheila-na-gig*, *The Oddville Press*, *Literary Heist*, *Menacing Hedge*, *The Laurel Review*, and *S/tick*. She was nominated for a Pushcart Prize in 2018, for Best of the Net in 2019, and was the recipient of a National Endowment for the Humanities for work on American drama. After working as a writer and an editor around the U.S., she is currently thriving in Canada.

Publication Credits

“My Science” was published in *Sheila-Na-Gig* online, Volume 3.3, Fall 2018: The Poets, and was nominated in 2018 for a Pushcart Prize and in 2019 for Best of the Net.

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