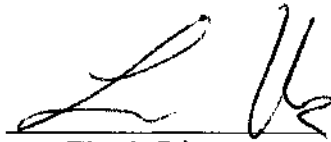


Through the eyes of an Amazon

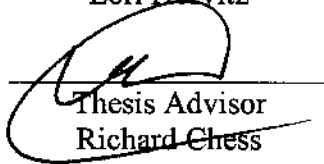
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Through the eyes of an Amazon

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Through the eyes of an Amazon

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Woman's work

Dingy beige towels and washcloths,
Warm, crackling with static electricity,
Tumble from the front of the clothes dryer
Into an old, broken, laundry basket;
Split-pea green, silver duct-taped together.
Occasionally, a tube sock or an oven mitt
Falls onto the slick linoleum floor, mottled blue and white,
And my mother quickly shoves the item back into the fluffy heap.
She lifts the cool cream-colored metal lid,
Pulls tangled fabrics out of the washing machine,
Throws damp wads through the shadowy opening of the dryer,
And hooks the strap of a pale pink bra over a plastic hanger.
She lets the lid clang shut, slams the dryer door,
Spins the noisy clicking knob till she finds the right cycle,
Pushes "start," and the low rhythmic hum of the machine begins.
She heaves the basket onto the washing machine,
Snatches a towel off the top of the pile,
Grips opposite edges with her fists
And shakes out any wrinkles with enough force
That the cotton cracks like a whiplash.
With practiced, precise movements,
She folds the coarse corners together, and then again,
Until she holds a neat lump, which she plops on top of the dryer.
She sighs, and reaches for another towel.

Grandmother's morning routine

She combs through coarse hairs,
 Silver roots freshly dyed to
 Match deep red ends,
And coils several strands around a cylinder
 Almost too warm to touch.
Still staring into the mirror, she feels blindly
Till her hand finds one of the many plastic clips
 Scattered across the surface of her scratched cherry vanity,
Then fastens the hot roller, tightly, to her head,
And reaches for the comb, again.
Once her head is covered in slowly
Cooling, curling knobs,
She begins to apply her face.
She rubs, first, some sort of cream,
 Anti-aging and expensive,
Across her small forehead,
 Wrinkled by arched brows,
Under her hazel eyes,
 Still beautiful, greener than she'll admit,
Over her full cheeks,
 Long-accustomed to pulling her mouth
 Into the shape of a gracious smile,
And down her chin,
 Stubborn as any in our family.
She swirls a tuft of soft bristles
Into a small pot of powder,
Then dusts a thick layer of that fleshy shade,
 Slightly darker than her true complexion,
Onto her face, till none of her own skin shines through.
She brushes and tints her faint eyebrows,
Shadows her eyes, with fine glimmering particles
 That slip into tiny creases,
Then, carefully, draws a line around her lips,
 Minding the sharp points of the cupid's bow,
And fills the empty space with her everyday color.

Hard habit

Soap slick fingers lather, scrub roughly,
Curve under a gushing faucet,
Cup an overflowing handful of water, splash—
A hot shock to the skin,
A short gasp, and
I bury my dripping face in the dry folds of a towel.
I smooth soothing lotions over
Angry naked features, roll a small
Bottle of “classic porcelain” between my palms
To homogenize any color swirls,
Jolt a glob of thick liquid on the edge
Of a wedge-shaped cosmetic sponge, and
Begin applying meticulous layers,
Of pale makeup over an even paler complexion,
Like bandages over an open wound. Slowly,
The angular planes and plump contours
Of my forehead, nose, cheekbones, and chin,
Are smothered;
The marks and scars coated,
Concealed, with chalky opaque powder.
After dragging a deliberate dark line above
Sparse eyelashes and blackening both slate eyes
With smudges of sooty shadow,
This war paint is finally finished,
Though I find no triumph in wasted time,
And sharp glares are dull
Weapons for everyday battles.
So many years of manufactured
Pigments creeping deep into pores,
Skin looks lethargic, lifeless;
Weary, wearing a daily death mask.

Heartfelt cliché

If I tore with tapered fingers
The soft flesh of my chest,
Broke thin bones,
Ripped out that faintly pulsing
Moist lump of muscle tissue,
Seasoned the tender meat
With sugar-sweet confessions
And salty-tearful concessions
Of powerlessness,
Then presented the offering
On a gleaming golden plate,
With polished fork and knife,
Would you notice the dark red pool
Shimmering like a jewel
Around your feet?
Would you bend, dip your fingers in,
Mistake the sticky liquid for your own blood,
And search for an opening on your marked skin?

More than envy

Rays waver through a white sky
And strike the dirty windshield.
Heat seeps through the glass,
Intensifying the warmth within your car.
Your lipstick melts, pools, and clots
Like a hot house bloom wilts;
Color slowly slipping down each petal,
Until the velvet shards loosen and
Drift into a quiet heap below.
You look into the hazy rearview mirror,
Dip a fingertip into the cracked plastic tube,
And with the waxy paste,
You paint ruby slices
On soft topaz skin.
Your mouth becomes a wound
To be licked. You remove
A smudge from your smile
With the sharp edge of your tongue.
Your teeth gleam and
Grind together the way
One row of glinting metal bits
Connects with another along the zippered
Opening of your dark blue jeans.
You wipe the greasy residue
That clings to your hand
Across your coarse fabric-covered thigh,
So even when your face is clean,
You wear the stain. But my summer
Eyes hold a glittering mirage;
Hold you
Cool, pristine.

Tighter and tighter

I.

The girl with a fractured mind mocks you for your lack of imagination.
 Her mind is fractured like a windshield hit by a stray rock; cracked, but not shattered.
 She can imagine a million scenarios, from Saturday morning pancakes to a vicious rape.
 Waking dreams; vivid images (loud lies) project before the transparency of her eyes.
 Today, she dreamt of swimming through a stretch of sand in a moonlit corner of her yard.
 Everything depends on how you look at it, she says; and refuses to be more specific.
 Looking at the world through her kaleidoscope lens, everything is beautiful and ugly.
 She locks the door behind her, watches the shiny knob, waiting for an unwelcome turn.
 She can tell you just how to slice skin so that tinged petals of flesh open, bloom, bleed.
 For her, love is a word, but hate is a reality; and she'll feel both for you, at the same time.
 But she ends all attachments eventually; she'll carve you out of her heart like a splinter.
 A warning; music floats over her in liquid waves, more tangible than you'll ever be.
 Being misunderstood makes her angry; softly, she growls "you'll never understand."
 Her hands are small and strong as they close tighter and tighter around your throat.

II.

She sees my skin,
 Faint, violet-bruised,
 Thin and translucent as wax-paper,
 But she calls it delicate, milky.
 Her hand next to mine,
 With skin stretched over small bones and
 Clever tendons, is the color of clouded honey.
 She moves, she is honey.
 I move, I am milk.
 Together, we are the Promised Land.
 We are earth.
 She is the warm sun-cured clay.
 I am the cool veined white marble.
 We are land masses, tectonic plates,
 Shifting, dangerous, molten.
 When my face is in flames,
 And I scorch to the touch,
 She comes near to claim a kiss,
 But takes a bite instead,
 Pawning her strength
 For pretended ferocity.
 This is the mood she's in:
 She hates,

She's silent,
 She's stone,
 She laughs when I cry,
 Disgusted by the violence of such frailty.
 She loves,
 Smiles into my face like a camera,
 And looks for herself behind my lens.

III.

In this light, she is the gold
 Once mined in these ancient mountains.
 These smooth slopes and
 Subtle valleys rise and fall
 Between us Everyday.
 The cold earth diverges,
 Forms new quick-coursing streams,
 To keep us on separate sides.
 We live behind an eclipse.
 Waiting.
 Our tender feelings caught
 In hard synthetic cement,
 While our eyes look upward, at nothing.
 Today, the stars conspired;
 And the dark sky glows for a few short hours.
 She kicks her shoes off into the floor,
 Slides underneath the blankets, shivers,
 Pulls fistfuls of fabric up under her chin,
 And smiles at me.
 Crawling into the space beside her,
 Between a groaning mattress
 And a cheap blanket,
 I slip into August.
 The heavy heat of that month
 Contained in the small rush of air
 As she whispers beside my ear.
 She hums the lilting, uncertain rhythms
 Of those tiny waves, those thick rivers of blood,
 Undulating in our veins, our hearts.
 For a long moment, distracted by her music,
 I forget that we are not simple.
 The hands of the clock hold knives.
 Soon, she will imagine me a visceral ocean,
 Drowning her in smothering pulsations.
 Soon she will not be here; she will be gone.
 The sun fades, flaming colors against smoky clouds.

Breakfast with Grandma

Every morning, and every night
Grandma pricks her fingertip, squeezes a drop of crimson
Onto a bright white blood glucose test strip,
Waits for a digital answer to appear on a small gray screen,
Clicks a cheap mechanical pencil, and
Scribbles the numbers in a sulfur-yellow notebook
She will show to her doctor, to be sure she isn't
Consuming a toxic level of mashed potatoes.
A vivid cardinal worries a thin branch just outside the window,
Reminding her of another story I've heard before, but
I listen, nodding, knowing
She retells to remember, to return.
The scratched laminate kitchen table top
Is cluttered with large print, easy-open pill bottles, and
Paper napkins overflowing from
A molded plastic Praying Hands holder.
The old TV hums and crackles beside her as
She works a crossword puzzle (to keep her mind sharp,
And watches "The Price is Right" for the
Dependable tangerine stage
And bright, eager smiles.
Then, the News. With an emphatic frown,
She accuses those Democrats, Liberals,
Heathens, Homosexuals,
Blacks and Mexicans,
Of destroying our nation...
Meanwhile, she doesn't hear the body count,
And she doesn't notice my silence
As I sit carefully carving segments into a grapefruit half,
Acidic juice burning in a small cut on my hand.
She calls me "Angel" when I bend to give her a hug
On my way to the faucet. Water flows and beats
Against the bottom of the metal sink while I wash the
Stinging stickiness from between my fingers.
The wooden chair creaks and complains
As I sit down next to Grandma, and
Pick up the "Arts & Living" section of today's newspaper.
Her trembling hand stirs a pink packet of Sweet and Low
Into watery decaffeinated coffee, the
Spoon clinking against the cracked cup.

When your mother called

I was lying
 Tangled
 In a floral-patterned sheet
 Beside you,
 On the lumpy futon
 You have shoved
 In the back corner
 Of your bedroom

When that telephone
 RANG
 Beside my ear.

Harsh
 Discordant
 Vibrations
 Beat against
 The flesh walls of those
 Delicate corridors
 Within my skull,
 Until you
 Reached over me,
 Held the receiver
 Near your face,
 The mouthpiece
 Near your mouth,
 And spoke in
 Short
 Phrases,
 With breaths
 In between each.

As I waited,
 I watched
 This turquoise vein
 Along your neck
 Pulse,
 Sending blood
 Away
 From your heart,
 For the moment,
 Only to return,
 Flowing throughout you
 To your toes,
 Your fingertips,

Your lips,
Which shifted and said,
"Goodbye, mother."
And your rust-flecked eyes shattered
Against the slate of mine.

Facing the music of us

Your voice lives
 In the velvet quiet
 Of black night.

Your arms are
 The claustrophobic air
 Closing around me.

I can remember how
 You slipped into my room
 And disrupted the silence—

With a whispered intention
 While I was distracted
 By the dark.

You shut off the lamp
 To hide those parts
 You stole.

What you stole, I gave of myself, and
 Now there's a piece
 Missing. That piece, you.

Our lines have blurred
 Beyond recognition.
 We find discord in place

Of harmonious measures, and
 We only know we've taken a
 Step by our footfall.

We keep time between
 And behind bars,
 As if to beat the poetry out of our lives.

You and I, we can't pause
 To turn the page. So we play by ear,
 Missing all the best notes.

More alone than ever before,
 I carry the burden of your absence
 Like the long, dull ache of amputation.

Solitude, before you, a still
 And polite companion,
 Has turned noisy and hostile.

Your breath has become
 A constant ringing in my ears.
 Alarming, calm-consuming.

Upon provocation,
 (Your prevarications)
 I hurl words, my only weapons,

Aimlessly into the pitch,
 And hear them descend
 Into your softness.
You're a beautiful song
 With a complex melody,
 But I can't sing lyrics I don't know.

Aimlessly into the pitch,
 And hear them descend
 Into your softness.
You're a beautiful song
 With a complex melody,
 But I can't sing lyrics I don't know.

Shadow

There's a shadow box inside my skull.
Light passing through my pupils reveals a beautiful scene:
We glimpse moon-brightness gilding a fading sky
Through the complicated lace-work
Of intertwined tree limbs and dark waxy leaves.
We lay on a large smooth rock that tapers into the river,
Water moving, quietly splashing around us.
The heartbeat in her palm slowed,
Syncopated, to match the rhythm of the river,
And the pulsing in my veins.
But that was summer.
Summer has passed into
Fall, and I'm colder than the season,
Reaping what I sow, wrinkles plow furrows in my forehead,
And as I turn in my bed,
Dream-tangled sheets bind my legs.
She took her warmth with her when she left,
So I shiver until my muscles go weak,
Not caring to cover my bare shoulders.
Stretching arms out in front of me, I clasp,
Pull close, a lumpy pillow, and
Bury my face in the folds.
Creased fabric, cool against my skin,
Smothers. The only air I can drag into hungry lungs
Is so thick with the scent of her hair, I nearly choke.
Residues from shampoo and skin mingle; are
Held tightly in the tiny fibers that
Curved under her head as she slept.
These days, I only see her through the slits of my lids:
Fine shimmering particles of dust float, slow,
Tracing silent paths for those slanted streaks of sunlight
Sifting between the closed window blinds,
Paining my bleary eyes, piercing the shadow box,
Preserving, in my mind, the time
When she lay close and showed me sparkling constellations.

A sonnet for Mother

You've got your fingers so tangled in my
Hair that I can't move my head. You stand so
I can't reach you, bite you. Whisper a lie
Into my ear, feign concern, but I know

You choose all that I see and my only
Control is to close my eyes, or cut this
Hair, cut you. This existence is lonely.
My hands are traitorous, I want to twist

Myself away, instead, they let you keep
Me powerless. I'm afraid that I would
Find my thoughts burdened by choice, restless sleep.
My hair won't pull if I'm still as I should

Be. You complain I'm making you hurt me
Even though you didn't want to hurt me.

Cat lady

Many small sun-warmed velvet bodies rub against her bare ankles
As she leans forward, tipping the torn corner of a large, heavy sack
So that hard bits of food, extruded into tiny fish-shapes,
Clink into the shallow metal pan that waits,
Along with over a dozen eager feline faces, below.
Immediately, pointed noses compete with one another
For a mouthful, and another of the feast, noisily scooting and
Scraping the dish against the concrete
Floor of her patio, cluttered with cats and junk.
She calculates:
An 18 pound bag, divided by the
Same number of cats, means she'll be spending
Another 10.99 this week, which ruins her budget.
She thinks:
Her pet population is out of control.
Generation after generation flourishes,
But spaying costs at least 60 dollars apiece,
And she doesn't have a whole lot of cash.
As she steps, cautiously, over animals
Chomping, stretching, lounging, pouncing, purring,
She imagines:
A shiny needle thrust between dusty tufts of fur,
A pitiful twitch and a heart stop; "humanely euthanized."
She decides:
She'll use some of her grocery money;
Eat peanut butter and jelly sandwiches.

Unnatural

When you smile

 At that sky,
 Blue bruised a darker shade,
 Lit by veins of yellow lightning,
My eyes swallow thunderclouds whole;
 Stormy weather fills my irises
 And swirls around gaping pupils.

When you walk,

 My mouth, a fragment of smooth glass,
 Is cracked by your carelessness;
 Clinks and crunches underfoot,
 Only shiny shards left on the sidewalk.

When you speak,

 My hands respond,
 Fluttering like crows,
 Mournful in their constant cloaks,
 As we stand under an autumn maple;
 Watching them, watching us.

When you are close,

 My body is the earth
 Wanting
 To keep you
 Over soft hills
 And bury you
 In deep valleys.

When you whisper in my ear

 How you love the rain,
 Even when it stings,
Rough winds tear open my upper atmospheres,
 And tears fall as rain
 Upon your face;
 Plump drops slide into your eye, and
 Before you can brush them away,
 A small part of me slips, unnoticed,
 Into your bloodstream,
 Pulsing
 Toward your heart.

Sestina Noir

The room was dark, dirty.
 I knew this place was considered shady, rumored a brothel.
 She was draped over a tattered chair. I felt her eyes occasionally linger
 Traveling the length of me. The tension in the room was thick as honey.
 Her blood-red lips spread into saucy a smile, but she remained mute.
 I became uneasy; hissed under my breath "fuck."

Her silent regard seemed to ask "why the fuck
 Are you here?" but, instead, she drawled "have a seat, honey,"
 And gestured toward a couch. She rubbed out her cigarette in an already dirty
 Ashtray; smoke outlasted the flame, continued to linger.
 The thick ragged carpet made my shuffling feet mute
 As I moved toward a shabby seat in this alleged brothel.

The peeling wallpaper in this supposed brothel
 Was a mossy shade of green; flower-flecked, faded and dirty.
 I imagined the walls were once as vivid as the warm honey
 Color of her eyes; intense against reckless smudges of mute
 Black pencil. Intrigued, I sat wondering "does she want to fuck
 me?" The harder I tried to shake the persistent thought, the longer it would linger.

My gaze fell on her brightly blooming mouth only to linger
 Impolitely. I decided if she didn't want to fuck
 Me, I should persuade her otherwise; pretend this is a brothel.
 Neither of us need ask for recompense, such would taint our mute
 Eloquence. Our exchange would be anything but dirty;
 Beautiful, sweet like honey.

A TV crackled and glowed from a dim corner, mute.
 The screen didn't offer a clear view; too dusty, dirty,
 But I didn't give a fuck
 About the TV, anyway. She rose, and with the slow fluidity of honey,
 She walked toward the door, only to linger
 In the doorway and motion for me to follow down the hallway of the brothel.

She led me to a room illumined by the beams of a honey-
 Hued moon. Nervous, I remained mute,

As she pushed me onto the bed so she could linger
Over each button of my shirt, until each was undone. "I want to fuck
You," she whispered, and I forgot to notice the dirty
Wallpaper in that charming brothel.

A pale mute moon lingers over this abandoned dirty brothel
And she is honey, beautiful as fuck.

Frayed

I need to lay these threads of thought
Down, untangle sordid knots, and
Arrange the frayed fibers of their
Conclusions, so my mind can rest enough
To make sense. Here we are again. I know
They didn't sound like lies to you.
Your pretty mouth opened; sweet words
Fell out, and I believed them, too.
But you, you don't sustain emotions.
They fizzle and fade, forgotten
Flames. Only smoke to remind us.
I need to harden myself, to
Avoid becoming sacrificial.
A lamb for your alter; my blood
Made freshly bitter from old
Wounds opened and infected,
My body bleeding dry as
I whisper your name
Before I die.

Rift

Before school, you would take my
Dirt-brown hair into your hands,
And braid the frizzy strands,
So a long, heavy rope hung
Down my back
Or curved around my neck.
On the way to recess,
A girl in front of me in the single-file line
Hopped a zigzag down the straight sidewalk,
Chanting "Step on a crack,
Break your mother's back," and
I wasn't a superstitious child,
But to be safe,
I tried, I tiptoed,
Letting my rubber-soled feet
Fall only on the smoother parts
Of my broken concrete path.
Sometimes I slipped, nearly fell, was
Saved by the grit and sand that
Crunched against my worn treads.
Every A+ and gold star sticker
I earned was for you.
I kept my hand raised till it was heavy, waited
For permission to speak, and
Pleased and thanked you ma'am.
But now my path is unpaved,
And the dry earth,
Hard and loose in spots,
Splits open before me,
A divide so wide
And empty
I can't stretch across.
I'm trapped;
No means to move forward
Without hurting you.
"Cross my heart..."
Before I die, I'll find a painless way to
Descend into this deep, dusty rift,
Use all the strength in these weak arms,
Pull myself up onto the fresh ground of the other side
And meet you where you wait, with that
Sad look still stuck on your face.

Little Cousin

Little cousin, I see you sparkle your eyelids with pastel pink powders,
Lacquer your lips with a cupcake-scented viscous fluid,
And apply globs of smoothing serum to your chocolate-brown spirals,
And I remember, not so long ago, you climbed into my lap and
Begged me to paint your tiny fingernails with bright colors.
When I lifted you out of your bubble-gum bubble bath,
Wrapped you in a faded yellow Mickey Mouse towel,
And gently combed out your tangles,
You would giggle, link your little arms
Behind my neck and squeeze.
Not so long ago, you needed me to bend low, hold your hand, keep
You steady as you walked, as you stumbled.
But now you're all about low-rise jeans, push-up bras,
Cell phones, text messages,
Best friends, boyfriends, and
I'm just not hip.
