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# Breaking curfew in the underworld

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**BREAKING CURFEW IN THE UNDERWORLD**

By

Britt Ashley

Accepted in Partial Completion  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

Kathleen L. Kitto, Dean of the Graduate School

ADVISORY COMMITTEE

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Professor Kelly Magee

Professor Laura Laffrado

## **MASTER'S THESIS**

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Britt Ashley  
May 11, 2012

BREAKING CURFEW IN THE UNDERWORLD

A Thesis  
Presented to  
The Faculty of  
Western Washington University  
In Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

by  
Britt Ashley  
May 2012

## **Abstract**

*Breaking Curfew in the Underworld* is a poetry collection which engages a contemporary re-mythology of the Persephone story. This multi-form project follows Persephone as she riots through the Underworld, choosing descent and refusing traditional notions of captivity and return. This collection uses experimental image-texts, erasures, compressions, and interferences along with traditional fixed-verse forms in order to expand and shatter the original story allowing for multiple Persephone personas to exist within the text and providing a means to interrogate ideas about female vanishing, silence, resistance, and violence.

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Thanks to Oliver de la Paz for his endlessly inventive prompts which provided me with the opportunity to invite Persephone into my work in the first place.

Very special thanks to my love, Bess Fernandez, for being my first and best reader and without whom none of this would matter.

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Usually in this story, [redacted] some  
monster [redacted] always careful  
[redacted] about [redacted] his gloomy kingdom  
[redacted] was quite [redacted] passionately in love  
Persephone [redacted] with

[redacted] Fortunately [redacted] She had plans  
[redacted] already [redacted]

Though this part does not occur [redacted]  
[redacted]

[redacted] She [redacted]  
[redacted] opens the ground underneath her and [redacted] Only [redacted] (the  
sun) sees her fall. [redacted]

She refuses [redacted] and [redacted] becomes [redacted]  
[redacted] her own city [redacted]

## **Persephone's Guide to Aboveground Girls**

We are all swooning here, drunk as young debutantes on slick buckets of new money oil pumped in from the Western plains. All our fathers look like undercover cops and even the most demure southern mothers grocery shop in high heels and low-cut blouses the color of bruised fruit. We are enormous here. We vote yes to more and more and more. We spoil our buildings like mistresses, covering them with ruby neon and too many mirrored windows. Everywhere looks like Christmas all year. Every place promises you your own dancing girl or at least a thick, juicy steak. We don't trim the fat. We want blood and marrow. We want cash.

Aboveground we learn how to devastate. On their sixteenth birthdays our older sisters grow sequined dresses like a second skin. We watch them shuck oysters from the gulf and shudder when they spit out the shy and briny bodies. Soon we too will be hungry only for pearls. For now, we sweat honeysuckle all summer long and ride our bikes through every alleyway in the state. Sometimes strange men in thunder-dark cars follow us and so we lead them home to our mother who has become a tornado. She opens the front door and the air thickens; all the birds in the county fly north.

## **Persephone Exhibits 4 Out 5 Warning Signs of Teens in Trouble**

For a smart girl, she had a limited vocabulary. During difficult conversations, she spit crows from her mouth. She wore her hair star-dark, unruly as ink. If she had been born a boy, her parents would have named her Grant or Oliver. Polite and docile, the kind of name you could put on a cracker and serve to dinner party guests.

Instead, she had a name that rang out knock-kneed and awkward as a second saxophone lesson. She let it echo and shatter, left it lodged in the ash black shoes of unwanted suitors. She wore it out dancing; let it show like a slip. She ignored warnings, courted cellar doors, made no promises to return.

## **Persephone Begins to Exert Her Bad Influence**

Whenever anyone asked her about Aboveground, Persephone would smirk her mouth in a rude curtsy. Debutantes began to imitate this behavior and soon their hair uncurled, tumbled loose in mesquite back seats, sizzled too close to the cherry-coal tip of lit cigarettes. Statewide, girls arrived years late for dinner, came home reeking of lip gloss, burnt sugar, and gasoline.

## **Persephone Plays Seven Minutes in Heaven**

At basement birthday parties Persephone slips  
LSD into the lip of her cherry Coke,  
spins the bottle and wins boy after boy.  
She brings them into the root cellar,  
extinguishes the singular swinging bulb.

That winter girls disappear into the dark  
one after the other after the other after the other.  
Some return to the stubbled husks  
of the cornfields just outside of town,  
knees and elbows bent beyond living.  
Some are found scattered skeletal in the woods,  
the bone-bright beads of an unstrung necklace.  
Six ribs, seventeen vertebrae, half a jawbone,  
one ring finger.

Here there is the low hum of fading filament,  
the slur and flourish of undone zippers  
and rush of cars from the nearby highway.  
Outside glass shatters on the pavement  
and their mouths fill up with earth.

## **Persephone and Eurydice Carry On Drinking**

They drink at night they drink at dusktime they drink at noontime and dawntime.  
They drink and drink and drink.  
They drink like men because they want it known  
they are not ordinary women.

They sit in the kitchen and refuse to cook.  
Persephone pours bourbon into chipped juice glasses with roses on the rim.  
Eurydice wets a finger and sets hers to singing.  
They drink at night they drink at dusktime they drink at noontime and dawntime.  
They drink and drink and drink.

They drag crescents of lemon through the sugar bowl and call it dinner.  
They are never hungry.  
They drag their burning bodies up the ladder to bed. They shovel sleep into the sky  
and step out of doors into morning with eyes black as ashes.

They drink at night they drink at dusktime they drink at noontime and dawntime.  
They drink and drink and drink.  
They let everyone mistake them  
for each other's wives.  
They play on for the dancing.

## Persephone's Table Manners for Fallen Women

*It is distressing not to be able to hold the gates closed  
against many things that are utterly shocking to taste  
--Emily Post*

That which is good remains good  
and it is good to be hungry,  
to crack bones and suck marrow,  
unafraid of appetite.

Crack bones and suck marrow,  
be selfish, obscene in your enjoyment.  
Order as though the bill will never come.  
Leave each emptied plate on the table.

Order as though the bill will never come.  
Alarm the waiters, open your mouth wide,  
Let the evidence pile up.  
Let the juices run down your chin.

Alarm the waiters, open your mouth wide  
and ask for more. You deserve it.  
Let the juices run down your chin.  
Understand this is not about eating.

Ask for more, you can take it.  
Tear artichoke leaves with your teeth.  
Understand this is about anger.  
Understand this is about the impossibility of enough.

Tear artichoke leaves with your teeth.  
Share everything.  
Understand this is about the impossibility of enough.  
Want more, want your own want. Want blood.

Share everything.  
Refuse sugar, demand salt.  
Want more, want your own want. Want blood.  
It is good to be hungry.

## **Persephone's Best Light**

Morning whistles and beats its wings. Nothing happens. Keys jingle; pins and tumblers tilt into place, the door opens and Persephone breaks into song. *It's so elegant, so intelligent.* Breakfast has arrived on time. Again.

She is the resident doctors discuss at meetings. They fill her file with notes until it swells and bellows like an accordion.

She tries not to predict the future. Come medication time she walks the corridor like a wedding aisle. She extends her hand to the pharmacist. She thinks he will be her husband. She thinks the sea has spit him back at last.

She raises her cup to him, rattles the pills in a toast. He winks and grins. She lilacs, she hyacinths all the way down the hall.



## Persephone's List of Common Mistakes

A

A girl

A girl walks

A girl walks in

A girl walks into

A girl walks into a

A girl walks into a bar

A girl walks into a bar and

A girl walks into *an* era

A girl walks into *an* hour

A girl walks into *an* abattoir

A girl walks into *an* ideology

A girl walks into *an* understanding

A girl walks into *a* eulogy

A girl walks into *a* one-sided affair

A girl walks into *a* bar

Handwritten musical notation consisting of a large, dense cluster of notes and rests, arranged in a roughly circular pattern. The notation is written in a cursive, handwritten style, typical of a musical score. The notes are connected by stems, and there are various rests and accidentals visible. The overall appearance is that of a complex, multi-measure musical piece.

Murmuration Dictation I

## **Interoffice Memo**

### **RE: Persephone's Hair**

Your hair-do should be becoming and yet not extreme. Untidy or extreme hair-do arrangements are considered bad taste for business. The hair should be kept clean, well brushed and well-combed so that it looks neat *most* of the time. Bleached or dyed hair generally detracts from the dignity that is required of women in executive positions. Some jobs, however, require that your hair keep its original color. With dyed hair you should use very little rouge, if any, and should avoid bright colors.

## Interoffice Memo

██████████

Your hair-do should be becoming ██████████ extreme. Untidy ██████████ arrangements are considered bad ██████████ for business. ██████████ kept clean, well brushed ██████████ it looks neat *most* of the time. Bleached ██████████ dignity ██████████ is required of women in ██████████ position. Some jobs, ██████████ require ██████████ your hair ██████████. ██████████ you should use ██████████ rouge, ██████████ and ██████████ bright colors.

## **Persephone and the Office**

Do you raise your voice in anger?

Do you display temper in other ways?

Do you meet rapidly changing situations without showing distress?

Do you?

Do you?

Do you?

Do you?

Do you?

Do you?

Do you?

Do you?

Do you?

Do you?

Do you?

Do you?

## **Now that She's Dead, She Knows Everything**

Before, Persephone tried to be a good listener. She paid attention to the bouquets of warning thrust at her and every other girl in town her age by mothers, men, and teachers. She practiced nodding solemnly in all the right places and widening her eyes when she heard the words *vanished, dusk, closed casket*. She promised to avoid alleyways, cellar doors, to keep her distance from the dank wet mouths of sink drains.

That winter nine girls went missing. Three returned to the stubbled husks of the cornfields outside of town, knees and elbows bent beyond the reach of the living. Others were found scattered skeletal in the woods, the bone-bright beads of an unstrung necklace. Six ribs, seventeen vertebrae, two femurs, one ring finger.

Warnings increased and girls were herded indoors at sundown. Persephone wore her funeral dress everywhere. She began to eat dirt. She began to plan ahead.

Handwritten text in Urdu script, arranged in a circular or semi-circular pattern. The text appears to be a form of calligraphy or a specific dialect of Urdu. The words are written in a cursive style, and the overall layout is circular, suggesting it might be a decorative element or a specific type of literary work. The text is written in black ink on a white background.

### **Identifying Characteristics: Persephone's Mermaid Tattoo**

Slinky inked dancer, mark of a girl who grew up in the belly of a ship. She loved you like salt. A salt ship in the belly of a girl leaves no room for whales or wailing. Every window is a door; every storm is open.





**Dear Sirs:**

We have heard your singing, your echoing  
requests that we return ourselves unharmed  
and immediately to the nearest location  
deemed convenient to you. While flattered,  
we must send our regrets in the form  
of two dozen pomegranates slung  
heavy across the backs of two strong oxen.  
Consider us vanished but not missing.  
Let our names ring out but do not neglect  
to become students of the silence  
that follows your cries.  
We are complete and uncourtable.  
We never promised to return.

Sincerely,

Persephone and Demeter

## **Persephone Invents a Sister I**

Three weeks after we were born our father was struck by lightning for the seventh time and lived. Our nursery hummed, electric with love and disaster. My sister and I teethed on tesla coils, rattled fuses in our cribs. At night we dreamt of iron keys and acre-wide plains. We grew luminous and difficult. There was never enough dark to be afraid of.

## **Persephone Invents a Sister II**

Our first memories are sawdust and smoke, the break of held breath when a room ruptures in appreciation. Inside an old-fashioned suitcase my sister and I curl together, sweet as beans in the mossy dark.

It is agony waiting for the spotlight to burn his slow fuse across the stage and ignite us.

Three shows a night and at every ending we burst through the veil of our father's trick, miniature glittering brides. We reveal and reveal and reveal. The startling architecture of our perfect limbs, unfolding whole and holy. Returned from unknowable places.

## Epigraphs for Missing Girls I

Young Girl on Bicycle (uncredited) well-liked last seen  
[redacted] Smoking In Church (uncredited) Honors Student  
last seen [redacted] in Corvette (uncredited) [redacted] in Hotel Lobby (un-  
credited) Showgirl last seen as promiscuous [redacted]  
Euphemism [redacted] in Mall Parking Lot (uncredited) Smiling Waitress  
(uncredited) last seen Single Mother [redacted] in-demand  
[redacted] rib abandoned vehicle poorly-lit

Aspiring Actress Aspiring Actress Aspiring Actress Aspiring Actress Aspiring Actress

{aspirant} {aspersion} {asphyxiate}

[redacted] [redacted] was 21 [redacted] and model [redacted] so many others  
before her, had moved from [redacted] to [redacted] in pursuit of [redacted] [redacted]  
dream. [redacted] wound [redacted] [redacted] [redacted] in a real life [redacted] [redacted] -- [redacted] few people are  
willing to [redacted] about in any detail.

{abbreviate} {abdicate}

### **Epigraph for Missing Girls III**

At this point, there are more questions than answers.

Insufficient idle talk

Avenue ended unexplained

Appeared her bed had been slept in

Insufficient idle talk

Vanishing act

Appeared her bed had been slept in

Hint given

Vanishing act

Shattered porch light

Hint given

Statement regarded as factual

Shattered porch light

Small scar on right forearm

Afraid of blood

Statement regarded as factual

Small scar on right forearm

Extensive dental history

Afraid of blood

Cruel joke

Extensive dental history

Seventeen individual items

Cruel joke

Mother contacted

Seventeen individual items

Avenue ended unexplained

Mother contacted

At this point there are more questions than answers

## **Persephone Vanishes, 1910**

In family photographs her face always blurred. Imperial mark heralds flash in the dark. In dark sparks, find a dancer burning her bad ideas. Ladder lead her rung by rung down the dark barrel. Let skirts smirk, let smart girls err and arrow.

## **Persephone's Family Kept Disappearance Secret**

It's all beach this breach. Groceries stored for war fill hollows. Pretty baby dreams of blue dresses, bare shoulders, oysters shucked from shells. She thinks she knows the ocean and it bores her. Belles tell time at holiday's horizon, swear it's swell, the sweltering. She oysters all night in a white gown underground, doesn't miss a thing.



## **Persephone Has a Soft Spot for Girls with Bad Habits**

“This guy’s a fucking freak but he’s easy.”

Persephone takes a sip of water, picks up her pen and flips to a blank page in her client notebook. She’s been working the phone sex job for about six months now and has come to understand freak as a relative term.

“His name is Michael Klingermann: prison fantasy, spanking, light bondage, girl on girl, golden showers, and anal for you.”

Nothing out of the ordinary so far. He still falls well within the guidelines of the company definition of a vanilla caller. Though to be fair, the working girls of Private School Secrets set the bar for kink pretty high. According to their handbook bestiality, incest, rape, foot fetishes, forced feminization, genital torture and scat play all might as well be the missionary position. They are not easily impressed.

“Okay, so what’s the catch?” Persephone asks.

“He wants you to bring Marcia Brady with you.”

“Seriously?”

“Seriously. He’s Warden Michael, you’re an inmate, and Marcia Brady is your prison guard. When I put him through, just start right in to the fantasy. You’ll say ‘knock knock’ and when he asks who it is tell him Naughty Little Prison Bitch Heather and Prison Guard Marcia Brady. You’ve both been bad – prison shower, shaved pussies blah blah blah, you fill in the blanks – but remember she is the one selling you out. He’ll fuck Marcia Brady in the ass and then make her pee on you.”

“Marcia Brady pees on me!?”

“Every single time. Are you ready?”

They are both laughing and Persephone asks for another minute. She rubs her jaw, rolls her shoulders and tells herself notfunnynotfunnynotfunnynotfunny.

“Okay, go ahead.”

The receptionist clicks off the line.

“Knock knock . . . “

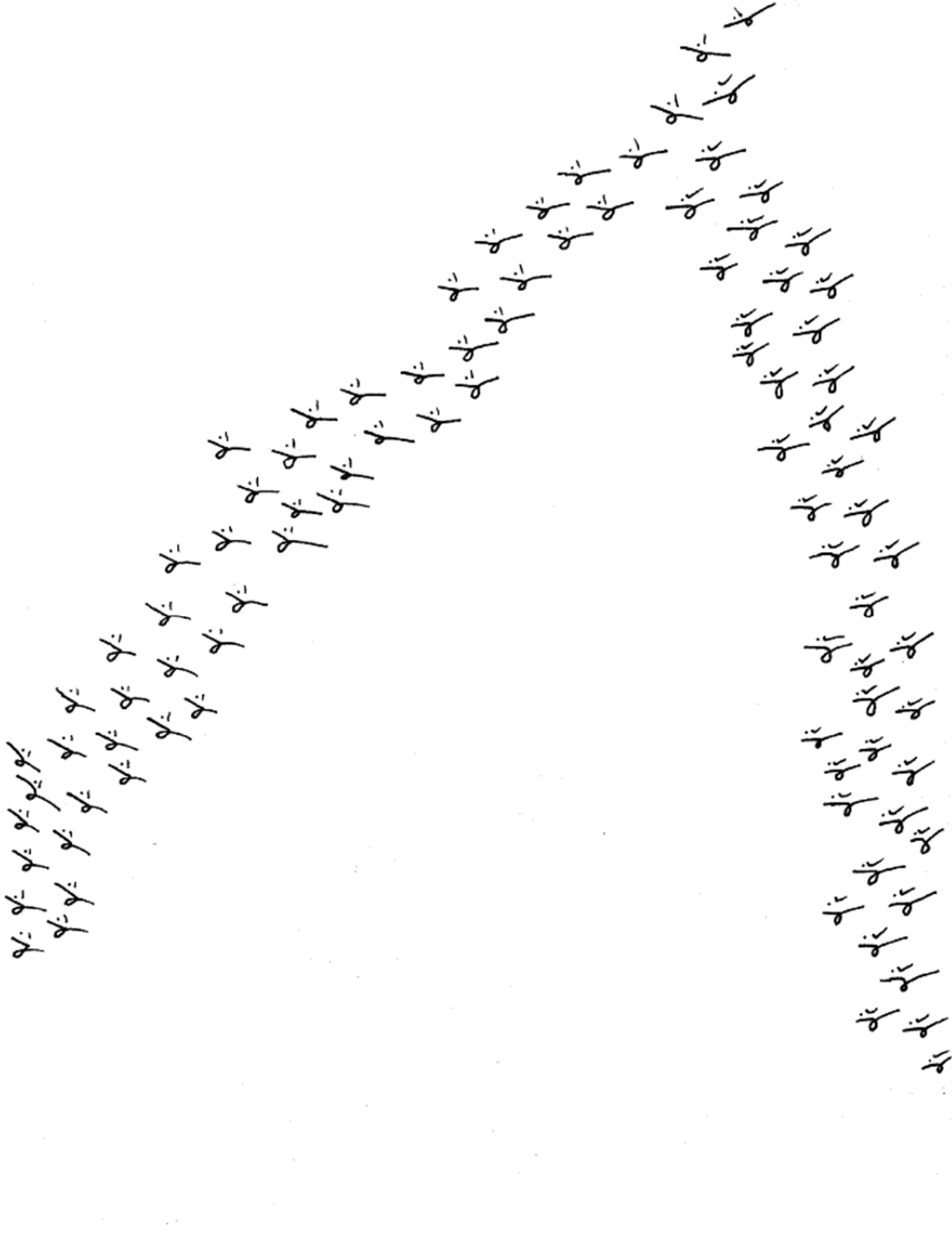
“Who’s there?” He’s older. In his 50’s at least and she can hear TV noise blaring in the background. It might be porn or just regular old man evening television. Nightline or Wheel of Fortune.

“It’s Naughty Little Prison Bitch Heather.”

She pictures him in his living room, sitting in a worn out armchair, dingy boxer shorts and black socks. Some kind frozen dinner forgotten or abandoned on the TV tray next to his chair. Gravy and meat, potatoes or pale green peas congealing in their rectangular compartments. Most callers sound like secrets, sound like the dark. This guy sounds like Salisbury fucking steak.

## **Persephone Arrives for Dinner, 102 Years Late**

Say what you will, but her father was a wonderful dancer. Escape artists favor capes, spill salt, count chickens, make hay make haste. In every kitchen's dappled apple there is a bee, spun drunk at the center. Slung and stung, stunned tender tongue. This is hunger. This is hung.



## **Persephone's Blind Date #17**

Suppose I were to tell you I am a criminal. Suppose I posed this as an invitation even though it is a warning. The most I want to do is show you the insides of my ankles. Their mute cuneiform, the impossibility of thirty-two floating bones.

My astrologer tells me in my last life I was a thief. I poured myself through open windows, easy as air. Back then, so many things fit perfectly in the palm of my hand. Silver forks, broken locks, fat wallets, oranges heavy with juice. And once, a gentleman's revolver, pearl handle curved and delicate as a throat in the dark.

## **Persephone Readies Herself for the Wedding**

When I was younger, I wore my hair shattered and stained every color of red I found under the bathroom sink. A dizzying spectrum of dyes left behind by old roommates and ambitious ex-girlfriends. I wore it big and bloody like a sunset, like the final scene of a drive-in movie in which only one girl survives. She was always me.

## **Persephone's Winter Marriage**

You told me you came from a place where the shore shatters and bullies. You told me the blood under your nails was rust. Instead of groceries you brought home hothouse roses. I was happy to go hungry. I wore my ribcage like a wedding dress. You left the taste of ashes in my mouth. You set every glass in my house to singing.

## **Persephone Contemplates Motherhood**

Persephone rolls ever eastward, mule-stubborn and swollen with nearly 9 months worth of baby she does not want. She pilots her piece of shit Pontiac with the same speeding teenage certainty that got her pregnant in the first place. She drives through the night, lighting menthol after menthol. She doesn't smoke them anymore but holds them out the driver's side window, luxuriating in the acrid smell as they spark and smolder down to the filter. Just because she doesn't want the kid doesn't mean she's going ruin him for someone else.



## **Persephone Picks Up the Phone II**

Persephone, can you hear me?

I want to come calling, want to kiss you with this mouth so you can know my real name, the way the length of it unravels in my body like ribbon from an open gift.

Persephone, are you there?

I am leaving my home this instant, roaring down the interstate in a battered steel box of a car that is rumbling loud, imperfect and strong as my heart.

I am bringing nothing with me but my body because it is the best true story I can tell you over and over and over.

Persephone, let's never get married. I'll take you out dancing in dark bars where we'll drink like men. Neat, even shots of bourbon lined up like target practice. We'll laugh hard and howling, our cavities shining like diamonds coughed up from the back of our throats.