

Contemporary Sonnet Variations

American Sonnet (95) - Wanda Coleman

seized by wicked enchantment, i surrendered my song

as i fled for the stars, i saw an earthchild
in a distant hallway, crying out
to his mother, "please don't go away
and leave us." he was, i saw, my son. immediately,
i discontinued my flight

from here, i see the clocktower in a sweep of light,
framed by wild ivy. it pierces all nights to come

I haunt these chambers but they belong to cruel churchified insects.
among the books mine go unread, dust-covered.
i write about urban bleeders and breeders, but am
troubled because their tragedies echo mine.

at this moment I am sickened by the urge
to smash. my thighs present themselves

stillborn, misshapen wings within me

American Sonnet 18 - Wanda Coleman

after June Jordan

this is the place where all the lives
are planted in my eyes. black things writhe
on the ground. red things gush from
volcanic gaseous tremblings/become blood and light
mountains of flesh raging toward rapturous seas
where crowns of trees inspired by flame extol the night

(my abysmal hear compels the moon compels
wave upon wave. compels reason)

the tombs are fertile with sacred
rememberings. the ancient rhymes. the
disaster of couplings. the turbulent blaze of
greed's agonies. shadows reaching for time and time
unraveling and undone.

sky river mother — your tongue plunders my mouth

From *American Sonnets* – Gerald Stern

Egg

And I have been a mother to geese and what not,
I hired forty-five poets in Pennsylvania
and sent them to the northern and western reaches
after I trained them at Lewisburg during the summer
institute and visited the schools and
traveled in an old Toyota in all the
sixty-seven counties and lived in a hotel in
Harrisburg three days a week and talked to them
about love and money and teaching and poetry;
and I was head of a teachers' union and I was
a chair, as we say, and I bought the food for my own
family and I did the Band-Aids, and I gave
advice in three or four cities, and there was a small
goose who followed me everywhere, honking with love,
and I was exhausted; I hated him, always on top
of me—I wanted to kick him—my third child!—
He was a machine, food on one end, shit on the
other—and there was an egg I had to break with a
hammer, I paid a quarter for it, the omelet was
orange, and huge, I was so hungry then.

The Blood Sonnets - Patricia Smith

1. Me, age 12

Sure that I was dying, that I'd died,
that the gush of iron smell and black
thick splash signaled all my sin gone wide,
I pried open the thin, wobbly back
of a record cabinet and crammed
underwear inside. My mother had told
me nothing about my body, damned
to swell, sprout hair, creak and bleed toward old,
so I hid the stiff, soiled Carters there
among the music, wedged wrong in all
that bladed jazz and blues I didn't dare
dance to. Gangly child, I was still small,
but too plumped to rest in my mama's lap.
Stashing my music, I braced for her slap.

II. You and I, too long ago

Brash adulterous fools, you and I
clash in a rented bed, this tryst illconceived,
the longed-for coupling off by
days. I bleed so much it seems a kill
has taken place, my body grieving
its harbor of woman, but do we
slow, think, push apart, stop? No. Believing
this chaos fated, we're slow to see
the sheets wide-streaked scarlet, the fat drops
peppering carpet, my thighs burned red,
until you deadpan, "Let's call the cops.
Looks like murder. Someone must be dead."
Spent in the midst of our vicious crime,
we phone other lives, lie about time.

III. Her, yesterday

The purplish clot fascinated you,
didn't it? The way it woke you and
trembled in your jammies like a clue
you hadn't asked for. You slid your hand
inside the cleft, wiggled fingers stained
with new me, grandma! We rose that night
and sistered for hours. Questions rained—
Where's the egg?—and answers were your right
and my relief. I took final stock:
Age 11, size 10 feet, my height.
Oh God, my girl, my woman, the shock
of sweet you lurching forward just might
kill me. Let's ignore the creeping sands.
Let's laugh and clasp each other's bloody hands.

my last modernist poem, #4 (or, re-re-birth of a nation) – evie shockley

a clean-cut man brings a brown blackness
to a dream-carved, unprecedented
place. some see in this the end of race,

like the end of a race that begins
with a gun: a finish(ed) line we might
finally limp across. for others,

this miracle marks an end like year's
end, the kind that whips around again
and again: an end that is chilling,
with a lethal spring coiled in the snow.

ask lazarus about miracles:
the hard part comes afterwards. he stepped
into the reconstruction of his
life, knowing what would come, but not how.

Terrance Hayes: From *American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin*

American Sonnet for My Past and Future Assassin ["I lock you in an American sonnet that is part prison"]

I lock you in an American sonnet that is part prison,
Part panic closet, a little room in a house set aflame. I
lock you in a form that is part music box, part meat
Grinder to separate the song of the bird from the bone.
I lock your persona in a dream-inducing sleeper hold
While your better selves watch from the bleachers.
I make you both gym & crow here. As the crow
You undergo a beautiful catharsis trapped one night
In the shadows of the gym. As the gym, the feel of crow-
Shit dropping to your floors is not unlike the stars
Falling from the pep rally posters on your walls.
I make you a box of darkness with a bird in its heart.
Volts of acoustics, instinct & metaphor. It is not enough
To love you. It is not enough to want you destroyed.

American Sonnet for My Past and Future Assassin ["Inside me is a black-eyed animal"]

Inside me is a black-eyed animal
Bracing in a small stall. As if a bird
Could grow without breaking its shell.
As if the clatter of a thousand black
Birds whipping in a storm could be held
In a shell. Inside me is a huge black
Bull balled small enough to fit inside
The bead of a nipple ring. I mean to leave
A record of my raptures. I was raised
By a beautiful man. I loved his grasp of time.
My mother shaped my grasp of space.
Would you rather spend the rest of eternity
With your wild wings bewildering a cage or
With your four good feet stuck in a plot of dirt?

From *Still Life with Two Dead Peacocks and a Girl* – Diane Seuss

Still-Life with Two Dead Peacocks and a Girl

She comes out of the dark seeking pie, but instead finds two dead peacocks.
 One is strung up by its feet. The other lies on its side in a pool
 of its own blood. The girl is burdened with curly bangs. A too-small cap.
 She wanted pie, not these beautiful birds. Not a small, dusky apple
 from a basket of dusky apples. Reach in. Choose a dusky apple.
 She sleepwalked to this window, her body led by its hunger for pie.
 Instead this dead beauty, gratuitous. Scalloped green feathers. Gold breast.
 Iridescent-eyed plumage, supine on the table. Two gaudy crowns.
 She rests her elbows on the stone windowsill. Why not pluck a feather?
 Why lean against the gold house of the rich and stare at the bird's dead eye?
 The girl must pull the heavy bird into the night and run off with it.
 Build a fire on the riverbank. Tear away the beautiful feathers.
 Suck scorched tough dark meat off of hollow bones. Look at her, ready to reach.
 She'd hoped for pie. Meringue beaded gold. Art, useless as tits on a boar.



The Last Still Life: The Head of Medusa

There are stories we refuse to tell. To tell them would be to set them loose upon the world. Like the girl (not innocent, no one's innocent) whose body was swooped down upon by a larger, meaner, murkier story like an enormous granite pestle that crushed her own winsome, soft, unconscious, run-of-the-mill story into something like cornmeal mush. Then, once upon a time (there is no once, there is no time) the girl was winnowed down like a bar of soap. She cut off her hair and refused to wash it. Beauty's so dumb, she was known to say, isn't beauty dumb? She moved into a rusted-out potato chip delivery van between the gasoline storage tanks and the river. She kept a clump of snakes in a green steamer trunk. Black ones. Gold, with patterns. Real writhers. Once she became a full-fledged woman, things around town started turning to stone. The dam dried up. Fields, banks and meadows. No rain. Then, overnight, the burial ground became a parking lot. All was stillness. The End.



From *frank: sonnets* – Diane Seuss

I floated I flew I fell to Earth to learn the pleasures of the lowdown
 which meant sometimes going downtown to the Ready theater
 to get my ticket punched by ole hook-for-a-hand I feared ambulances
 janitors knives dogwood blossoms my sister's boyfriends one of whom
 threw a knife at my head one of whom pressed his whiskers into my face
 and whispered things my girlfriends' boyfriends one of whom shot me
 in the bone behind my ear at a shooting gallery my unspayed dog's periods
 we put her in my sister's bikini underpants stuffed with a Kotex pad the girl
 whose eyes were crossed cowboy boots on the wrong feet the birthmark
 girl Dwight who saw through me Little S hit and killed by a jeep on 13th St.
 the guy who hit him sticking his tongue in my mouth at an adult party
 Jesus the eschaton which I learned from a well-read Jehovah's Witness
 was a synonym for the end of the world my father resurrecting
 my father not resurrecting I feared floating flying falling the lowdown.

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The sonnet, like poverty, teaches you what you can do
 without. To have, as my mother says, a wish in one hand
 and shit in another. That was in answer to I wish I had
 an Instamatic camera and a father. Wish in one hand, she
 said, shit in another. She still says it. When she tells me
 she wishes I were there to have some of her bean soup
 she answers herself. Wish in one hand, she says, shit in another.
 Poverty, like a sonnet, is a good teacher. The kind that raps your
 knuckles with a ruler but not the kind that throws a dictionary
 across the room and hits you in the brain with all the words
 that ever were. Boxed fathers buried deep are still fathers,
 teacher says. Do without *the*. Without *and*. Without hot
 dogs in your baked beans. A sonnet is a mother. Every word
 a silver dollar. Shit in one hand, she says. Wish in another.