

Woman as Pylon in an Empty Lane

I make all the right moves. Blinker signals my right turn. I brake at the all-way stop. But a Dodge Ram is in such a rush they swerve around my Jeep Cherokee and speed onto the next street. When I finally make my turn, the street stretches empty. The houses stare past me into each other, or into a vacant lot. All day I wonder if I exist.

Woman as Mrs

I forgot myself in the uproar of lace, diamonds, and fine china. Six months later at another wedding, a woman asked when I would have children. She smiled and a particle of me drifted away. When cards and letters arrived with my spouse's first and last name written after my new title, another atom of me faded. He and I did not make specific plans for house or hearth, or the sound of small feet. *Wait and see* was our motto--though the question of when would fall on me, default maker of home and humans. I gathered fragments of myself, collaged them:

A woman reads on a faded couch.

A woman sings to a song played at high volume.

A woman goes for a walk by herself.

Woman Moves Through

The whole me walks across a street. Slips into a car and steers. Lifts the smallest objects with my pincer grasp: lint on a blanket, burnt flake of oatmeal in a bowl. When blizzard winds push my car to the side, I turn the wheel toward them. My small frame pushed by a larger person's as they barrel through a large space, unaware. So petite, everyone comments. I fit into small spaces to hide and hide often. Close a door with my hand flattened and disappear into a room. Hours, they call it, when they notice.

Woman Considers Her Mirror Image

It is only a sheet of glass, cut to meet a frame. What I see is really behind the glass, in the silver coating: streaks of gray spiral into my curls and a whisper of dark hair rests above my lips. The creases of my smile no longer fade quickly. I am not elastic—I am etched by lines and marks, a pattern of age. Bad luck descends if I rebel and strike back, if I smash my reflection to shards, but this mirror is only an object. It holds images as they pass: a girl's dark hair, her head turned toward the opposite wall.

Woman Remembers Sleep

Instead of dozing, I float inside a jar clouded with belief. Some salesman dangles a pillow and bottle of basil lotion.

When sleep was good, I went all night and didn't wake at 4:30 a.m. to empty my bladder or toss through the remaining hours before sunrise. Some nights after waking I read myself to sleep, mother the restless child I've become.

I drift to the next street where a group of women around my age whispers to one another and exchanges slips of paper. A woman offers me a small strip folded on itself. Opened, the paper is blank.

When sleep was best, I didn't dream at all, or wake anxious and sad since I wasn't busy all night creating stories. Those nights I slept hard, the saying goes, or like the dead, goes the other saying.

Woman Reclaims Her Time

There's a broken clock sinking in the bathtub. Glass scattered underwater. A few drops of blood on a towel. My thumb bruised. Spackle for the wall where I threw the motored object. So my spouse and daughter don't ask questions later, I say the clock stopped and I threw it away. If the time arrives for truth: I was sick of its orders and expectations. *Now. Tonight. Should have done that last week.* I cracked and drowned its perpetual sound. The day is blank. Again. Forever. Finally.

Woman Forgoes Etiquette and Artifice, with Reservations

I don't have the energy to keep up appearances. Let gray hair streak my temples. Let my light mustache darken every year, my nose hairs lengthen. Makeup hasn't touched my face since age 40. The hardwood floors in my house are scratched in high traffic areas, some boards stained with cat vomit. When my parents visit, I act aloof. I'm silently ashamed and angry about this shame. When I address Christmas cards I forgo rules of etiquette, eclipsing formalities that omit me, a married woman who never uses the title MRS in daily life. Elders alive in the late 20th century would say I've made it— house, husband, child in college, steady job. Two decades ago, my wedding was a simple celebration. Minister and pianist. Daisies by the dozen. I made everyone think I was like them.

Woman Digs Into the Earth

Hard at the surface then soft. Worms sniff me and circle my wrists. Smooth bodies, like mine.

They sense my wanting. Tell me to feel it more deeply. I dig down so deep and dark I glisten. Hold nothing in my palms but the fingers of worms.

When I surface, I bring nothing back. Shake myself clean. Oh, but my wanting. It's brand new. I notice where every band of light lands: tulips, the air, fluttering leaves, the dog at my heels.

And the house in front of me where I spent my life, its furniture and tables, the staircases? No light.

Dispatch from Planet H

Before I left Earth, I removed the candle from the mantel and its crisp scent of apple. The frames, too, with photos of deceased grandparents, their faces frozen in joy. I removed the ceramic owl. Removed books from shelves--anthologies, novels, the occasional comics volume. Removed a woven wall hanging. Every memory announced itself in decibels. The couch where I dozed off watching a sitcom. Too much noise even in objects I couldn't lift. All hauled to storage in case I return. The owl with its smooth feathers would have been small enough to bring. But I needed a break so clean it resembled pain.

Dispatch from Planet H

On Earth, I stared at my face in a mirror until I couldn't see myself, only my different performances. Saturday in sweats. Weekdays in fitted clothes for work. Occasionally a night with friends in a fancy blouse and slacks. I changed the canvas to please. Concealer. Mascara. Light lipstick. My hair brushed if not washed, always styled. A sparkling pendant between my breasts.

Robots do not applaud after I gather stones in a pile. If I were to play a part, they wouldn't notice. The only mirrors are their reflective bodies that stop at my command, my reflection always distorted.

Here, I've stripped all artifice. Even the sweet tones of my voice, chirps of a chipper greeting. I wear the same full bodysuit in black, superhero spandex. No high tech accessories. The curves of my body align with the roundness of stones.

Dispatch from Planet H

I stand in a dark landscape. Only stones and stars attend me. My voice cracks after months of disuse. Then a steady, clear peal. After what seems a long time, another person speaks into the air. I answer back. She turns her face to me. She resembles stones and stars in her solitude. Surely she is my own reflection. Who else would stand here with me? Then she moves in her separate place. She calls again, sounds nothing like me. For a while, only the two of us lifting voices. The sky awash with stars.

Acknowledgments

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Allium, A Journal of Poetry & Prose: “Woman Moves Through”

Escape Into Life: “Dispatch from Planet H (*Before I left Earth, I removed the candle*),” “Dispatch stared at my face),” “Woman as Mrs” (originally appeared as “MRS”), “Woman as Pylon from Planet H (I stand in a dark landscape),” “Dispatch from Planet H (On Earth, I in an Empty Lane,” “Woman Digs Into the Earth,” and “Woman Forgoes Etiquette and Artifice, with Reservations”

Menacing Hedge: “Woman Reclaims Her Time” and “Woman Remembers Sleep”

Pirene’s Fountain: “Woman Considers Her Mirror Image” (originally appeared as “Your Reflection”)