

UC Riverside

UC Riverside Electronic Theses and Dissertations

Title

Persephone's Refrain

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/17x6b0mj>

Author

Wilcox, Alexandra McDermott

Publication Date

2014

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
RIVERSIDE

Persephone's Refrain

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Creative Writing and Writing for the Performing Arts

by

Alexandra McDermott Wilcox

June 2014

Thesis Committee:

Professor Jill Alexander Essbaum, Co-Chairperson

Professor Andrew Winer, Co-Chairperson

Professor Anthony McCann

Copyright by
Alexandra McDermott Wilcox
2014

The Thesis of Alexandra McDermott Wilcox is approved:

Committee Co-Chairperson

Committee Co-Chairperson

University of California, Riverside

Acknowledgements

I want to thank my husband, Brian, who is a pillar of strength, support, and love. I can do anything with you by my side.

I want to also thank my children, Ethan, Liam, Chloe, Naomi and Makena for being a solid source of support and listening to every poem I have ever written.

I want to thank my Dad, Frank, who has shown me what it means to be strong, how to love after loss, and what unconditional support looks like.

Thanks also to my amazing Professor Jill Alexander Essbaum whose herculean efforts helped make this a reality. Without you I don't know that this could ever be written.

Dedication to my mother, Nadyne.
I miss the sound of your voice. I miss your hugs. I miss your love.
I try to do my best, every day, because of you. I will never forget.

Table of Contents

My Pet Sorrow	1
My Friend Loneliness	2
My Relationship with Grief	3
It Does Not Rain in Heaven	4
Reflections on the Last Moments I Spent With My Mother.....	5
Night	6
A 69 Year-Old Window in a Hospital Room.....	7
My Bench.....	8
Faith	9
Rumor of Daylight	10
Snow is the First Sign of Drowning.....	11
Love Letters	12
Lost Soul	13
Cemetery	14
My Grief Map	15
Winter	16
I Can't Change	17
Hell Hath No Fury	18
Twisted UnFairyTale	19
<i>Come back</i>	20
<i>Resurgam</i>	21
Go Through Me.....	22
Be My.....	23
Dream.....	24
Talisman.....	25
Time Capsule	26
Questions Only You Can Answer.....	27
Winter's Haiku.....	28
Here.....	29
After Today, I Will Never Hold Your Hands Again	30
Wicker Chair.....	31
Grief's Journey.....	32
For Liam.....	33
For Ethan.....	34
Deceased Love Letters	35
In Search of Faith.....	36
What the Medium Told Me After You Died	37
John Doe	38
An Irish Daughter's Blessing.....	40
Requiem of Tears.....	41

I Still See You	42
The Love Song of C. Ainsley	43
For Tomoe Goezen	46
Blue Bonnets	47
Marine Monument	48
The Sun	49
To the Man on the Street.....	50
In the Fog and Shadows	51
Raccoon Eyes	52
Eyes	53
Raccoon.....	54
In the Fog	55
Brown Eyes	56
Broken.....	57
I Am a Shadow.....	58
The Gods.....	59
The God of Lost Homework.....	60
God of Showers.....	61
Goddess of Whispers	62
God of <i>Yes</i>	63
Patience is a Virtue	64
A Modern Lullaby.....	65
The Man	66
School Daze	67
Love Letter to the Entitled	68

My Pet Sorrow

Come Sorrow.

I won't shoo you away.

Rest *here* on my shoulder.

But, please don't chirp in my ear.

Your Blues keep me awake.

No, I won't. Your faux social grace.

Your powerful beak, *I know*.

But if I feed you crumbs of sadness—

Will you let me go?

My Friend Loneliness

I stopped for Loneliness to hitch a ride,
He kindly stepped inside,
My car had only seats for Us-
Despair served as our guide.

We drove along the Interstate –
Paced humanity.
I lost my temper only twice.
He claimed Insanity.

We passed Religious, gathered churches,
Memorial benches, lunchers.
We passed the Spring, Beginning anew.
We passed the Fall and Winter.

Paused before an old Tree Song,
Embraced the Morning Oak-
Branches scarcely visible,
Chimes that didn't belong.

This was months ago – and yet
It feels like yesterday
I bargained with Eternity-
And denied your resting place.

My Relationship with Grief

Jump on my back,

I tell him.

It's really no problem.

I've been toting you around for months anyway.

His scruffy graying beard chafes my neck.

I hold my breath.

He clings to me.

What have you been eating, I ask him.

You are heavier and harder to lug.

This may not work you know-

I may have to leave you behind this time.

You're beginning to weigh me down.

You smell like you haven't showered in months.

And I'm not sure how to introduce you anymore.

It Does Not Rain in Heaven

It rains here
it snows here
it hails here.

Heaven knows
just shine
just heat
just glow
can
allow

the spotted
giraffe neck
as it hovers
the brown
Serengeti belly.

Reflections on the Last Moments I Spent With My Mother

Vulnerable and yellow.

Her last words were nothing.

I think she hates me still.

Night

Between
the
ghosts

orange
light
glaze

splinters
bamboo
knots

slide
purple
moon

A 69 Year-Old Window in a Hospital Room

Nothing but slats
where shade should
shine through,
bright, open air
out of order.

My Bench

This green summer morning, I go-
to the gray marble bench, lacquered,
dew that fell, washing day-old tears-
coolness, embrace my bare legs.

I won't speak. Won't remember your funeral.
A daughter's duty will simmer. I'll traverse.
Memories. Very young, like a Nomad.
My Soul – content, as if you are sitting beside me.

Faith

Sometimes it grabs me by my arms.
Pins them to my chest.
I can only speak to God.

I am not afraid.
My mom taught me-
“Faith don’t let me down.”

The snow falls. White pillows.
Stuffed sadness. Dangling fingers.
Falling hello’s.

A bird materializes. Smashes
into my window. Black feathers.
My faith. The beak crooked yellow.

Rumor of Daylight

Rays undo everything-

the Certificate

he doesn't want to sign.

The sky

a step behind.

Snow is the First Sign of Drowning

Your neck reddens
with rising splinters of frost-

novelty you can swallow,
The flakes: blue enough-

to masquerade as terror.
Still enough to make you sleep.

Love Letters

I don't find Hope
under the crescent
of a silver moon
and Her sabbatical
feels like a wayward
grain of sand.

I don't smell flowers
under the fingerprints
of Night. Instead,
I smell cold hands.

When the stars come
out, with a chilly embrace
my coat pockets
will be lined
with love letters.

Lost Soul

Her soul pecked the glass.
She wanted to see
the two new little bodies,
but she didn't understand
why she couldn't get in.
She couldn't understand
why she couldn't hold them.
They had her name. They even
had her mouth, her wide-set eyes,
her small, delicate hands.
She couldn't understand
that the wires keeping her alive
were cut a year ago
and the holes in her hands glowed
whenever she waved at my window.

Cemetery

The chimes ring
but no wind blows.

The black of my pants
is fierce,
as the crying hawks
lace the sky.

Tinkle Tinkle!

But bo-ra-ri
brings no ka-ki-ki,
no ra-ka-ki-ki.

And no Saint comes
in ghostly violet.

My Grief Map

I won't bargain.
He would never
give you back.

I am alone. Oriented
to your Death, lost
in the thickets of my Life.

I am less prepared
than most. I am
Immobilized.

Winter

Like a woman's breath
(convincingly and unexpected)
Destroys cornfields,
splinters husks, flies there and here.
People gaze.
People take photographs.

Winter
upsets unexpectedly.

A woman's breath: a blizzard.
(snappish, shadowy)
Reveals Old Things,
defends careful, honest things.
People move.
People grasp kernels.

Winter
breaks everything.

I Can't Change

That plastic tube,
yellow breath-
not what you wanted.

I can't change a thing.

That beeping artificiality,
red automatic light-
not what you wanted.

That bleak, white
bedsheet, that gown-
The flowers are foul,

And the world is winter.

Hell Hath No Fury

I steal notes from wicked players,
their fingers red and sore-
bleeding from tips and edges,
hurting more and more.

My daggered tongue sways at night,
with flapping flames of gore-
like wrestling leaves that forget winter,
and what it has in store.

Pelted from my verbal stones,
that split him at his core-
the rocks that fill my bloated mouth,
oozing more and more.

I never know why it happens,
or what drives me to make him bleed-
the ice picks that poke his soul apart,
his wounds that set me free.

Twisted UnFairyTale

Mirror mirror on the wall,

What bullshit do you have for me?

You gonna tell me I'm beautiful?

You gonna say I'm free?

Mirror mirror on the wall,

That lynches day after day-

What worries you about seeing me?

Is it what you have to say?

Oh mirror. My mirror on the wall.

What did you do for me?

Did you see it and store it all?

So you can say it all to me?

Mirror mirror on the wall,

How could you let me go?

How could you watch it all happen?

You couldn't just say No?

Mirror. Oh mirror. On my wall.

You do not *at all* reflect me.

Just regrettable, dingy air.

And your lack of company.

Come back

To a black leather couch

with five little pairs of feet-

Two infants, two adolescents, a teen-

Come back - *to me.*

Resurgam

I sought gentle
reassurance
Death is not
my end
Relata refero.

I felt solitary
cold
withered without
my friend
Respice finem.

My tears did not
fail me
I heard voices in my
my head
Redeo ut vita.

Letting go
I see you
reaching for
my hand.

Go Through Me

I want to scream

But my artificial restraints tell me not to be so *unfeminine*

I want to cry

But my tears are hollow

And no one will take me seriously if I do

I want to haunt Him

How does that work in reverse?

I want to tell the Universe

Or whatever the new age religion is

That you're not theirs

You're mine

And that you're not leaving any time soon

He can riddle your body with stones

He can strangle your organs

But if He wants you? He goes through me first-

And I'm not letting go.

Be My

Be my broken
mirror. My once-
upon reflection.
My sprinted marathon
race. Be my cold
winter shade. My below-
zero side. My exposed
hiding place. Be my
silent thirst. My soul-
quenching vapor. My
burned sickly face.
Be my only never.
My unhappily-ever-
after. My jagged
embrace.

Dream

You almost reach me, like falling snow.

Like pheasants in a dream of Fall.

Like the beggars of moonshine who call out for night.

Like an owl, wings out, embracing.

A hoot. A shush. A wakening.

Talisman

Fur boots in the hallway closet
show me I am dreaming.
I wait by the window,
in my winter bathing suit-
hoping to say goodbye.

Time Capsule

Ordained in her hallway
to dispose of time.
Gravity treads invisible marks,
a corridor, white travertine floors,
Versailles - a secret kept.

Her morning ceremony:
Wind clockwise your brass weights.
Give precision to your timed impulses.
Clutch cancer-free dumbbells.
Don't forget to breathe.

To the kitchen and back
and back again.
Her microscopic muscle tears,
Your chimes
told her she was still alive.

No Magpies or hanging Meyers,
the democratic honeybee moves on.
A butterfly rubs his wings.
Can you hear? I envy *you-*

Your chimes kept her alive.

Questions Only You Can Answer

How long does it take a spool of thread
to become an angel?

What will I do when the banana peel
won't hide the bruise?

Will you wake to the sound of the steel brush
as its whiskers climb your tomb?

Who can solve the riddles of the puzzle
from the Times on Sunday afternoon?

When will death magnify
infant blades on your frozen hearth?

Why does my left ear burn
when I remember your stiff cold hands?

Winter's Haiku

Dead twigs perched on high,
Rotting Oak tree lamenting:
An autumn goodbye.

Here

My mom does not speak

An ice cream still
a palm tree chill

Fallen yellow hair
on pine wooden sills

Stilted suffering
Foo dogs in miniature

Two year-old photographs
And the stuffiness

of Wednesday's lawn mowers
and pruning shears

Everything brings me here.

After Today, I Will Never Hold Your Hands Again

Unravel me

Distant corpse

County stamp

Permanent

Terrifying

Steadfast as a pine box

My mind shelters

Regret

A Belief

Of powerful insects

Wicker Chair

Wicker chair, no one has thanked you-
for holding her frail white arms,
in the braids of your sturdy brown frame.

You, your outstretched arms-
reflected light, lifted her high enough,
her feet never touched the ground.

Some try to settle into you-
Reluctantly, you bear their weight.
Others recall your monogamy.

They honor you. They move swiftly past.

Grief's Journey

I have willed to go
where tears don't fall,
to hills - no ragged edges, no prickly stones-
where butterflies float
wistfully.

I have been warned, *Don't go.*
Where oceans salt with fortitude
and where rocks gallop to the surface
into the shadows of the dying sun.

For Liam

He put his hand
inside my sleeve
and we merged
into needles of pine
until I fell
and was buried
under burlap
and the memory
of a warmer season.

“Give me a pocket full of berries
and not this carob flavored memory”

If Willow trees can talk
to other Willow trees
his will can make me
well again.

For Ethan

My blue-eyed boy
rest your gaming hands
around me, feel the stillness
or instead, forget
that I am dying.
Swing with my London capsule,
My white Eye, my carriage.
Eighteen minutes and thirty eight seconds.
Long enough for a photograph.
Time enough to win another life.

Deceased Love Letters

There were the letters
in the box.

*Don't send them,
you must not.*

He won't understand,
she said.

And they're so thoughtful
laying there.

Yes, we were thoughtful once too,
he replied.

Then placed the envelopes
in her hands.

Sealed.
And stamped.

In Search of Faith

I look
to Greeks
to Romans
to Egyptians
and Jews.

To understand.
To find a God.
For you.

What the Medium Told Me After You Died

I see golden pine, like her once-upon hair.

I see a white satin pillow, and manicured hands.

I see an overkill of shoes.

I see a table.

Her sister.

And her brother.

A designated dealer.

A place to play cards.

John Doe

I see you.

John Doe.

I hear you.

John Doe.

John Doe.

That is true.

You hug the street
as you sit waiting
for tarnished red to polish
and become steel blue.

But it is a crimson sweater.
This is the language of streets.

The cleats that pass by,
The pleats that glide by,
They heave a coin to Fin.
(short for *Phoenix*).

Look up.
See a star.

A star is the march
of a merchant journey.

Merchants mumble,
the tried soles
slish, slish
which scatter and sound
and blind snow.

Snuggle Fin.
Snuggle Fin. Snuggle tight.

Swat an ash, see it fly.

Find a coat with sleeves.
But show your hand.

What is a hand.
A hand is complete.

An Irish Daughter's Blessing

May Fall flowers bloom around you,

Winter trees provide sanctuary,

Spring sunbeams warm your face,

Summer rain dust your resting place.

Until I see you again,

 may the cherubs

 hold your soft hands

 like a beholden daughter's

 embrace.

Requiem of Tears

You must get a certain amount
of tears. A biological allotment.

Like the number of years
I smoked cigarettes (two).

Also, the total thrown to detainees
in a Baghdad prison.

Six rounds doesn't stand to reason.
The bullets thrust at new I.N.G. recruits.

No. Not 400 grams, the weight of rice
a person in sub-Saharan Africa eats.

I'm sure it's more than that.
12,500 doesn't sound right either,

the number of illegal immigrants
sprawling on Malta's shore.

Nor 5,000,000. That's dedicated
to children who die from malnutrition.

I know it isn't 17,000,000 –
how many people who live on \$1.00 a day.

Maybe it doesn't matter.
We are the only crying species.

But why, then, is it a surprise
when we see a dolphin

carry her dead baby
for days?

I Still See You

In the grocery store.

It can't be you.

The cold tile floor.

I stare. Your perfect mole.

Your brown tattooed eyebrows. Gentle arch.

You glance. Find my freckled face.

Sniff lemons, I say. Step closer.

Smell Chanel. Red St. John knit.

I reach. Pretend to like lemons.

We don't speak. Your last words,

"I am going to kill you -
for bringing me *here*."

At night,

I ask if you hear.

Run my fingers over the dates on your grave.

But, during the day,

in the store,

the lemons never seem to be out of season.

The Love Song of C. Ainsley

My daughter, we shall travel at night,
when the stars hang in the sky.

Let us travel
through sleepy hills
and half dead streets.

You will ask,
How do we get there from here?
Do not ask, let us travel.

The gray dew creeps through railings on the porch.
It leaves a trail of secrets like a spider's web.
It climbs over glass doors and tulip gardens.
It blows a chill on backs of sleeping lady bugs.
It nestles between petals that were shunned by the stars.
There is no warmth. There are only moonprints.
A reminder that the sun departed
and may not come back any time soon.

You will ask me,
and I will answer:
How do we get there from here?

I know the whispers of morning and regrets of night.
I have kept time with falling rose petals.

And I have known the rabid ways of suburban animals-
the jaws that leak desire and fear.

When you ask me to tell you once more,

How do we get there from here?

How shall I start and where do I begin?

Should I tell you that I have seen

grown men in their cars,

afraid of their picket fences.

Where shall I start?

Should I tell you that I have walked to the pier at sunrise,

and watched lonely fishermen huddle

to tell each other about their last great catch?

And when the sun finally rises

and we find it is still cold

Should I, after pancakes, tell you more?

Should I tell you that I sit on benches

with inscriptions of times long gone

and lives long spent

with only hyphens to show their significance?

Should I tell you that I have witnessed

my greatest legacy

and it is gone?

Will you want to know, after I have passed the maple syrup

whether it was worthwhile?

To have looked for the fountain of youth.

To have found it a moment too late.

To look for another drink elsewhere.

To wait for you to stand up and say,

Let us travel, let us find it today.

I am tired. I am tired.

I shall start to carry a watch.

Should I go back to the pier? Should I bring a sweater?

I shall wear open-toed shoes and bring a hat.

I shall sit on the bench and wave to the Pelicans
who only seem to travel in pairs.

I do not think they will wave back to me.

For Tomoe Gozen

Your pomegranate lips obey you-
velvety white skin and licorice black strands.
Bows and arrows curtsy at your elegant frame.

At Awazu, you are poised with valor.
At Awazu, you encounter opponents.
You whisper *Sayonara* to dismantled heads.

Warrior. Unbroken horses greet you.
You lead the line.
You descend into peril,

Into vigor, into love.
You fight indeed.
You die with honor.

Mata Itsuka Ne.

Blue Bonnets

The girl skips over to the blue bonnets, to pick the perfect

one,

and the flowers bow to the wind.

They are so obedient.

They need no discipline.

Marine Monument

A bronze statue in full uniform.
Remains of salt and a Ti-leaf lei.

Embracing his feet,
a plaque with gold letters - *Semper Fi*.

The Marine salutes
the early morning fog.

The Sun

How tolerant
Above the gathering
Of anxious needles rises
Wintry, luminous, perennial,
The sun.

To the Man on the Street

He slurps from a white bowl
in his right hand.

The water tastes warm to him.
It smells right to him.

It looks good to him.
I can tell by the way he clutches
the plastic bowl.

He slumps. A stack of boxes
block cold air.

It sounds good to him.

In the Fog and Shadows

With eyes
like two
yellow diamonds,
the raccoon
wings its
hands,
unafraid
of car horns
and trashcans
that rumble
on broken asphalt.

Raccoon Eyes

Two yellow diamonds
in the fog.

A brown figure
wringing its hands.

Car horns.
Shadows

of trashcans.
The rumble

of broken asphalt.

Eyes

Trashcans rumble
against asphalt.

A brown, broken
figure wrings its hands.

In the fog, two yellow
diamonds.

Car horns.
Shadows.

A raccoon.

Raccoon

In the fog
car horns
and shadows
wring their hands.
Eyes like two
yellow diamonds.
Trashcans rumble
on broken asphalt.

In the Fog

Shadows.

Carhorns.

Hands.

Two yellow
diamonds
rumble.

In the fog
trashcans
break asphalt.

Brown Eyes

Shadows rumble on asphalt.
Trashcans. Fog. Two yellow
diamonds and a broken figure
wringing its hands.

Broken

Like a raccoon
I wring
my hands.
I am afraid
of car horns,
the rumble
of fog
on asphalt.
Trashcans.
Diamonds.

I Am a Shadow

My eyes
are Raccoon.

Yellow diamonds
that rumble,

that wring,
in the fog,

my broken hands
are asphalt.

The Gods

Some say the Gods must be silly,
I don't believe them. I do *not*.
They just don't get our problems,
Like: snarfing, boogers, and snot.

We need an assortment of Gods!
Modern ones that will help us out.
Current Gods that get our issues.
Ones that know what we're about.

Here's to finding the ones we need,
For ordinary snags galore-
Like what we'll have for dinner,
And what to do when we are bored.

The God of Lost Homework

I am the God of Lost Homework!
Call me Ryan Metropoleeze.
I will find your week-old papers-
All you have to whisper is *please*.

I come as quick as you call me.
I swirl and twirl and twist around.
I sneak deep inside your binder.
Until your papers I have found.

Don't hesitate to summon me!
I will come rather hastily.
Because no one likes lost homework-
Not your parents, your teachers, or me.

God of Showers

Unhappy dirty children,
You cannot refuse to bathe,
For I am the God of Showers,
And I can make it rain.

Go hide under your covers,
But believe me you will see,
You cannot hide forever,
I will force you to be clean.

Goddess of Whispers

I am Gwen - the Goddess of Whispers.

You can find me everywhere.

I wear noise cancelling headphones,

(Beats by Dre if you really care).

I bring peace to grandparents.

I am Queen of Shush.

Soothing sensitive eardrums,

With my whispering touch.

I tap you on the shoulder,

I can blow hard in your ear,

I will get your attention,

Even if your voice disappears.

I can mobilize the neighbors,

Older brothers, sisters, and more,

I get others to help me work,

So you will whisper like before.

God of Yes

I am the God of good news,
For parents? This means – *yes*.
I help you with your manners,
So you never have to guess.

When your parents ask for something,
You never need to hesitate,
All you need to say is simply
Yes, Mom. That would be GREAT.

I sit on your shoulder daily,
Floating right next to your eardrum,
Whispering *yes, of course, and please*
Like a wily little hum.

I buzz around you like a bee,
Enforcing *Yes* in my own way.
Parents call me every night,
Teachers call me every day.

Patience is a Virtue

Patience is a virtue.

Mom says it all the time.

Dad says it's when you wait
and you haven't got the time.

They tell you to relax,
even if you want it bad.

You're supposed to be happy,
even when it makes you sad.

You're supposed to be OK with it,

The thing you are waiting for.

Frankly? I've waited . . .

so . . .

long . . .

I don't want it anymore.

A Modern Lullaby

My Baby, My Babe – it's time for bed!
The owls will watch your door.
Let's get you snuggled up tonight-
It's nearly 8:54!

I've closed every one of your blinds.
I've tuckyed tuckeyed you twice!
You have to shut your azure eyes.
You have to sleep tonight.

Time to count your rainbows!
Feel free to count sheep too.
It doesn't matter what you count,
But it's time for you to snooze!

The Man

Take me to your leader,
I boom in a thunder voice.
Take me to THE MAN I said,
You have no other choice.

My parents speak so much of him!
Every day they do!
THE MAN is such a mystery-
Like God or what's in stew.

They stuck it to him once again!
My family cried out loud.
THE MAN must be a fighter,
His parents must be proud.

Do you think he looks like me?
Brown hair and a missing tooth?
Smart enough for fourth grade math?
C'mon now. Tell the truth.

And? He's got a BIG BROTHER.
Who watches his every move.
You'd think THE MAN could figure out,
How to get going on his groove.

You know, I've got some army men,
With tanks and guns and trucks
I'll chopper in and rescue him-
THE MAN could get un-stuck.

School Daze

You say that school was harder
when you were a kid like me.
They piled on mountains of homework
and made you turn off the TV.

You lugged encyclopedias
to school then home and back.
They forced you to do pull-ups.
They never cut you any slack.

Papers! Quizzes! Exams! Tests!
Every single week.
A million hours of study?
Mom, did you *ever* sleep?

They **ONLY** gave you pencils?
You **NEVER** had clicky pens?
Were your teachers ogres and trolls?
Was the library in a dungeon?

Did a dragon greet you at the curb?
And shuttle you on his back?
Did it eat your brown-bagged lunch?
And your two day-old snack?

So I guess I have it really good?
With my Iphone and Galaxy Gear.
'Cause I forgot to do my homework,
Mom? Can you pleeeeeaaaassee sign here?

Love Letter to the Entitled

i am not going to protest
a war
a law

i protest a way of life

i protest a generation

you don't care
about nothing

you expect
everything

when I was your age
we had our minds to distract us

no video games
no LED lights

no mobile devices

we doodled on

lined
note
book
paper

even stuck ourselves with lead

we
hopped on one leg

s
k
i
p
p
e
d

m r
u p d o e
j e p

ten cents from the tooth fairy
santa claus
god
we cared
about grades
our parents
the government

you and me
we have
nothing
in common
don't you expect help
from me