

Love Songs to Pig-Cupid: A Collection of Poems on Bodily Autonomy

Description

The AutoEthnographer





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Authorâ??s Memo

If I tell you to close your eyes and picture the USA, what do you see? New York skyscrapers, Hollywood movies, the American Dream? How about France? But of course, youâ??re thinking of Paris: red wine and art galleries, elegantly starved models smoking Gauloises on their balconies, the usual aesthetic of curated debauchery. You know, of course, that these dreams arenâ??t the reality for most people. There are multiple sides to every story, to every country. There are always in-between places.

This collection of poems is a glimpse into the lives lived on the margins, where the laws put in place to protect basic rights and bodily autonomy cease to apply. This could be in an isolated community in the Deep South, on a London street where modern slavery still persistsâ?¦ or on a pig farm in rural France. In the conversation about bodily autonomy, there are places that get left behind, places where the *Me Too* movement never reached. I can only share my own account, but it is important to bear in mind that France is a prosperous and privileged state, with access to legal abortion, which is not the case for many countries.

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Here is the *Diagonal du Vide*, or the *Empty Diagonal*: Franceâ??s very own population desert, characterised by kilometres of run-down agricultural land, sporadic phone signal and ghost-towns that havenâ??t changed since the 1950â??s. It is not unusual for men to answer the door with shotguns. It is the side of France not seen on postcards, where a subculture of violence flourishes in the back fields. A place where things grow wrong and rotten when left to their own strange devices.

Here is a farming community where family violence is handed down like an heirloom: rage is passed from father to son, fear from mother to daughter. Submission is taught in school, through the daily indignities and tiresome rituals that go ignored and even encouraged by figures of authority: the *proviseur* who doesnâ??t believe your story, the *CPE* who writes it off as *a bit of fun,* the teachers who sit back and watch while a cross-country run turns into open season.

We grow up eventually, and some of us get out. The boys leave with second-hand cars and sports scholarships, if theyâ??re lucky. The girls leave pregnant or dead.

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I began writing angry poems. This collection looks at bodily autonomy through the eyes of farm animals raised for slaughter, with themes of murder, castration, birth and assault, all parts of everyday life in the countryside. The image of the pig occurs frequently, both as the predator and the victim, the way men are both architects and victims of the patriarchy. People have always turned to art as a way of highlighting the truth when the justice system fails, and perhaps words are the only weapons that can dismantle a culture of carefully curated ignorance: the blind eye, the brush-off, the averted gaze.

The most insidious part was that I found myself perpetuating it, so accustomed to â??the way things wereâ?• that I told a dear friend that what had been done to her was her fault, that she needed to grow up, that it happened to everyone. There are some things that take a lifetime of unlearning, cycles that take generations to break. Talking about an issue is the first step towards resolving it, and poetry has always been an opening to conversations that are long overdue.

â??Bodily autonomy goes beyond access to legal abortion.

Bodily autonomy goes beyond access to legal abortion. This issue has always been at the heart of human culture: the age-old pattern of one person seeking control over another. It is the way public transport ceases to be a public space when you are a woman, but a place populated by predators, governed by those who do not wish you well. It is the way a girlâ??s childhood ends at eleven, or nine, or four, when she is suddenly deemed desirable, when she has to cover up and come straight home because the boys at school are no longer her friends but strangers who corner her behind the gym hall. The way she is taught right from the cradle that she is a vessel for the desires of others, subtracted from her very sense of self.

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â??The way we are all told that our role is to please, to appease, and if we fail in our duty to do so we will be liable for the damage.

Can bodily autonomy exist in a society where the human body is reduced to a product marketed for consumption? Can free will exist in a culture where women are subconsciously schooled to seek out our own killers, taught from a young age that â??possessiveâ?• is a synonym for â??caringâ?•, that male anger is just a misguided expression of passion? This is also the way we domesticate farm animals, feeding them by hand until they come when called, so that when we go down to the long field with a shotgun, theyâ??re already standing in line.

Today, I am far away from home and any pig farms both literal and figurative. My old friends and I once joked that our home was a place built for leaving, and I suppose that we all left, in our own ways. The tourists that visit our home no doubt see an idyllic place: the vineyards, the rolling hills, the comically backward traditions, how quaint. I lived some of my happiest years there, and I often find myself missing those hills and that honest way of life that you just canâ??t find in these sanitised cities. But there also needs to be recognition that France has one of the highest levels of feminicide in Europe, that one in eight French women will be raped in her lifetime. And this pales in comparison to many countries where a womanâ??s chance of survival dwindles almost to none. There has been enough silence.

â??We must not close our eyes again. The circle cannot go on.

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Photo of a Cupid Sculpture by Alex Harmuth for Unsplash

Love Songs to Pig-Cupid

I.

Girlhood is a bloodsport

Learned in playing fields

Yellowed by cricketsong, the secretions

Of sycamores

Coagulate the tar. Will it hurt? Stripped down

To tickbite mottled shell-pink shame, down to my silly shoes

& the soft sore lock-click of breathing.

They come in and leave

Something open in me, a terrible eye.

What quaint overreactions !

Thin grey cuckoo spit stings the eye for but a second,

Pig-cupid, the sun shuts down on me, I am burned quite white

& it is over very quickly.

II.

The same boys, men now, with their little lusts and lamentations.

So serene as they sit there, so effortlessly

Cunning. *Cocotte*,

We know these men. They would have us

Twisting, our insides scraped

Venison red, fallow-deer

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Dead, dear fellows. Fathers, now.

III.

We are well-acquainted with the Scissor-man:

The stairway, the door-knocker, the six

Needlewomen in pinstripe dresses, corn dolly stitch-eye

And woollen hair.

One girl bore a baby straight into the canary grass behind the gym hall

Class-of-2013 pluot, blood-clot, chanterelle

These elegant consummations, rot.

Aunts with dark eyeglasses conspire in undertones.

I am just a small girl and vulgar. I will not survive

It (The usual adorations and dotes)

The steps go on forever and they are white.

We go, quietly. As things go.

IV.

Things go and fathers come back

To stone our wicked mouths, mothers

Wait behind doors with hatchets to kill

Pig-cupid. You remember him like a rash:

Skin rolled up & up like canvas, drains

Clogged with our hair, saliva sassafras

Supermarket carrier bags in the throats of rotting girls.

Pig-cupid: my first love rests the tip of his daddyâ??s *laguiole* hunting knife

Against my eye and it is almost

Ecstasy. A male friend, well-meaning, reduces me to raw parts please

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Forgive me, pig-cupid, fathers push mothers down the stairs

Over unmatched socks.

V.

We open inside ourselves one paperthin escape:

Masturbatory â?? I jest.

Even that now bores me to tears.

The way out is this: to have been bright and wanted and to be those things

No longer. Unfond fingers pluck out the eye

They opened in me, cauterise and subtract,

these so-called divine things (soft pink calyx/

Cataract/muse) (the usual adorations and dotes)

Take it as a blessing, hagstone, wishbone. Crone.

They have ripped out my spine/No/They have let me

Live, drab and sexless

Fatherless, and free.

VI.

And what if I bear a daughter into the canary grass

With Grandma Lilianâ??s rosebud mouth? What then?

What will we tell her, pig-cupid? The same?

That we are blighted with these bodies that hinge

Themselves open like houses, on and on

Until we are repossessed? That we must tread the road

To white annihilation, these endless steps to

Unbecoming? (the stairway, the door-knocker, the six)

That fathers will come, proud,

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Write poems perhaps (divine feminine/flesh

Of my flesh) and soon forget. The steps go on

Forever and they are white. Fatherhood folds away

Neatly, infinitely reductive, readily

Forgiven: the eye opens, and love shrinks

To the size of a spermatozoa.

(We go, quietly. As things go.)

Roadkill

Unlucky sevens dangling from the dash, the D911

thin and fleeing from your headlights, the stars

start their cold slide through the waiting dark. You say

youâ??re a monster of my making and I sit there rabbit-eyed,

splayed red and rare. I am not a passenger

I am the piled thing you left on the side of the road.

Stop for a *grand crÃ¨me* in a grease-yellow gas station.

Slice my mouth on a plastic fork and smile for you,

tonsils strung up and singled out. The dead deer

in the car park cricks its neck and screams *love me*,

gut-pink and stinking of formaldehyde. Thereâ??s something

leaking under the table but we both ignore it.

This is how it will always be and I will always

be here, hymning around the fish-hook you drove

down my throat. In another world I stop the car

and rip you from my atrophied larynx, trailing

a string of sinew, the glint of the hook, and the heart

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inside still silver, wet, wriggling out of spite.

Pig Castration (Huile sur Toile, 130cm x 122cm)

You pass me the scalpel pig-slick between your knees

& tell me to do what has to be done.

I snigger and think *bollock,* think *couille*,

think back-bacon motherless & greedy

scalpel sweetmeat shivering silver

crosshatch, correct me if Iâ??m wrong,

quick quick pop it out

like a pomegranate pip leave it butterflied open & stinging.

VoilÃ ,

kidneyblue blood-blister helix hurt

pluck out the unspent seeds with my scissor-beak.

Papa, remember

the wasp nest in the rafters,

the unstung embryos

packed in their cradles wingless with wanting.

Yes of course Iâ??ve tried the forceps

& pulling myself out of you, shotgun pellet

in the urethra, tidy black decimal,

unavoidable arithmetic, these inane

multiplications (we grow and grow

until the body breaks the neck)

O string

sinew, scissor sharp, clever girl.

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Skitterscratch of blue spray no stitches.

We run back to our mothers squealing.

Surrogate

Bald naked Barbie dolls swing from the wisteria bush:

We take turns beating them with a rounders bat

Until a hairline fracture to the hip cracks rib-eyed

Into morning. We are surprised to find them hollow,

Organless. Death is dainty and aneurysm pink.

These are the stones that we throw:

(Astrid, MÃ©lisandre, Eric, Judith, Adele)

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They say thereâ??s nothing left of them now, not even a snip

Of skin to remember them by. Weâ??ve changed the names, of course.

Any similarity to persons living or dead is purely

Coincidental.

Push our daddyâ??s drill through a pretty plastic eyesocket, peer

Into the ripped hole of the face like a mirror (Doorways

And cataracts, the devices and diagonals

Of shame: surrogate bodies in which to store

Our own small hurts.)

But killing time comes again, always.

Brush the blood clots from our hair, sop up the spillages

Before we walk to school, delicate, defeated, demure.

We leave our dolls pinned to the dartboard, autopsied

And understanding.

(Model pupils, they say. Make us proud.)

Calico / Curtain Call

Itâ??s high noon when we find you

Teeth-to-the-sky in the dustbowl

Beneath the caravan, liverspotted

Underbelly up, toes *en pointe*

Like an elderly showgirl

Ever so dainty & so

Decorous. Dug up like a bone. .

We try to tack you back together

Of course: sloppy backstitch

And hem: red gingham, ticking

Stripe.

You used to be pinkwhite

You used to have a polka-dot collar

O eyes

Dried up

Ducts gummed

With tartar. We did this to you

Ace of Spades,

Pied & variegated

With disease, my pestilent

Harlequin, *ma pourriture*.

We did you to death

With turned heads.

(Brat

Scavenger, of course we knew.

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You deserved long walks and bone

Marrow. You deserved

Euthanasia.)

Sometimes I fantasise about the pitchfork

About being under it

Unwanted and incontinent, bowels blink open

In a ragged gape of fear, heart hanging like a wet rag

Calico

Calico,

The dayâ??s getting past it, now.

Must get

Down to business. A pleat-tuck

&-package elegant little sham

We compost you quietly. Things

Are easier to excuse when they are neatly

Underground, Coquelicot asleep in the poppies,

A petite tragedy. Unavoidable.

What a darling little flower nobody cares.

Under the thickening crust the spine

Still curls in on itself, a sorry

Excuse, beloved no longer &

Folded away like a dirty

Valentine, red and white, never sent.

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Credits

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