

Classic Poetry Series

Catherynne M. Valente

- poems -

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Catherynne M. Valente (5 May 1979)

Catherynne M. Valente (born Bethany L. Thomas) is a Tiptree-, Andre Norton-, and Mythopoeic Award-winning novelist, poet, and literary critic. Her short fiction has appeared in *Clarkesworld Magazine*, the *World Fantasy Award*-winning anthologies *Salon Fantastique* and *Paper Cities*, along with numerous *Year's Best* volumes. Her critical work has appeared in the *International Journal of the Humanities* under the name Bethany L. Thomas as well as in the essay anthology *Chicks Dig Time Lords*. She keeps a blog at and currently lives on Peaks Island in the state of Maine with her husband. Valente has also published five books of poetry and won the Rhysling Award for speculative poetry.

Her debut novel, *The Labyrinth*, was a Locus Recommended Book, and her subsequent novels have been nominated for the Hugo, World Fantasy, and Locus awards. Her 2009 book, *Palimpsest*, won the Lambda Award for GLBT Science Fiction or Fantasy. Her two-volume series *The Orphan's Tales* won the 2008 Mythopoeic Award, and its first volume, *The Orphan's Tales: In the Night Garden* won the 2006 James Tiptree, Jr. Award, was nominated for the 2007 World Fantasy Award, and was *The Plain Dealer's* #1 summer reading novel in 2007.

In 2009, she donated her archive to the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America (SFWA) Collection] in the department of Rare Books and Special Collections at Northern Illinois University.

Themes

Valente's work tends to center on folkloric and mythological themes, reimagining fairy tales and genre tropes via feminist, surrealist, and postmodern lenses. Her writing is characterized by stylistic and structural experimentation as well as complex linguistic and poetic techniques.

Multimedia and mythpunk

Valente tours with singer/songwriter SJ Tucker, who along with her own varied discography composes albums based on Valente's work. The pair perform reading concerts throughout North America, often featuring dancers, aerial artists, art auctions featuring jewelry and paintings based on the novels, and other performances.

Valente is extremely active in the crowdfunding movement of online artists, and her novel *The Girl Who Circumnavigated Fairyland in a Ship of Her Own Making* was the first online, crowdfunded book to win a major literary award before traditional publication.

Valente coined the term mythpunk as a joke for describing her own and other works of challenging folklore-based fantasy in a blog post in 2006.

AWARDS

2006 James Tiptree, Jr. Award -The Orphan's Tales: In the Night Garden (vol. 1)

2007 Story South Million Writers Award for Best Online Short Story - Urchins, While Swimming, Clarkesworld Magazine Issue 3

2007 World Fantasy Award Nominee (Best Novel) - The Orphan's Tales: In the Night Garden (vol. 1)

2008 Rhysling Award (long poem category) - The Seven Devils of Central California, Farrago's Wainscot Summer 2007

2008 Mythopoeic Award (adult literature) - "The Orphan's Tales" (series)

2009 World Fantasy Award Nominee (Best Short Story)

A Buyer's Guide to Maps of Antarctica, Clarkesworld Magazine May 2008)

2009 Andre Norton Award "The Girl Who Circumnavigated Fairyland in a Ship of Her Own Making"

2010 CultureGeek Readers' Choice Award (Best Web Fiction of the 21st Century) "The Girl Who Circumnavigated Fairyland in a Ship of Her Own Making"

2010 Hugo Award for Best Novel (nominee) - "Palimpsest"

2010 Locus Awards (nominee) - "Palimpsest"

2010 Lambda Literary Awards - "Palimpsest"

Eserleri:

Novels

The Labyrinth (2004)

The Ice Puzzle (2004)

Yume No Hon: The Book of Dreams (2005)

The Grass-Cutting Sword (June 2006)

Palimpsest(Feb 2009)

The Girl Who Circumnavigated Fairyland in a Ship of Her Own Making (May 2011)

The Habitation of the Blessed(2010)

Deathless (March 2011)

The Folded World (November 2011)

Myths of Origin (November 2011),

The Orphan's Tales: In the Night Garden (2006)

The Orphan's Tales: In the Cities of Coin and Spice (Oct 2007)

Poetry

Music of a Proto-Suicide (2004)

Apocrypha (2005)

Oracles: A Pilgrimage (2006)

The Descent of Inanna (2006)

A Guide to Folktales in Fragile Dialects (May 2008)

Nonfiction

Introduction to Jane Eyre (2007)

"Regeneration X" in Chicks Dig Time Lords (2010)

Collections

This Is My Letter To The World: The Omikuji Project, Cycle One (2010)
Ventriloquism short story collection (2010)

Glass, Blood, and Ash

I.

Please, silk-#8203;#8203;sister, do this thing for me.

I do not want to sit on that broad-#8203;#8203;backed horse,
or smell his skin, grassy and hot as boiled husks,
inside a shirt ropy with gold tassels and primogeniture.

I never wanted it. I just
wanted to look like you
for one night. It should be you
hoisted up like a sack of wheat—
I stole your ruby comb,
your garnet pendant.
It must have been
your jewels he loved.

You will like it-#8201;-#8201;they will put emeralds in your hair
and a thin gold crown on your head.
They will rub your skin down to supple
like a favorite tiger, soon to be
a favorite carpet.
Your spine is fit to queen-#8203;#8203;posture, not mine.

It is only a little shoe, only a little lie.
It was made from a mirror whose glass
was ground in another tale.
Look into it. It surely sings
that you are the fairer.

The doves, their claws still dusty with kitchen-#8203;#8203;ash
brought me a knife hammered out of a diamond.

It is so thin
that a breath will shatter it,
but so sharp
that the flesh it cleaves
does not even know
it has been cut.

Give me your heel.
I am the kind one, remember?
I would not hurt you.

Please, we are sisters;
out of the same striped pelt
did our father scissor our hearts.
Do this thing for me
your sister is afraid of the man
who loves her so much
he cannot remember her face.

Hold your breath—
I shall hold mine.

II.

The ash that crossed my forehead
was finer than the ash that greyed my feet—
soft as a kiss.

I wanted to dance. I wanted to be warm.
I wanted to eat. I wanted anything
but the furnace—grating cutting its
familiar welt—mark
into my back.

With my forehead exalted I went into the wood,
calling out to a dead mother
like a saint with her eyes on a plate.
But she did not come—
a nightingale instead hopped towards me
baring her little brown breast.

I am the song of your beauty, it chirped.

Like a hoopoe, she bent her head
and bit her own heart
in two. Out of her thin chest
spilled a gown red and gleaming,
bright as blisters.

It was this I wore under the palace arches,
this which cuffed my wrists,
cupped my breasts,
pinched my waist.

I walked into his arms bathed
in the blood of a nightingale,
and when we parted
he was drenched in scarlet.

III.

Please, silver—sister, do this thing for me.

I do not want to wear that dress again.
I do not want to kiss him, I do not want
to know what a prince tastes like. I do not want
to hear the castle doors shut behind me.

I never wanted it. I only wanted
to stand in that torchlight for a second

and feel as you must always feel.
It should be you hoisted up
with his saddlebags—
I stole your coral ring
and your attar of roses.
It must have been
your scent he loved.

You will like it—;they will put pearls on your fingers
and a thin ivory crown on your head.
They will hang you up in a hall
and everyone will look at you,
everyone will remark how beautiful you are.
Your spine is fitted to that golden hook, not mine.

It is only a little shoe, only a little lie.
It was made from a coffin whose glass
was ground in another tale.
Look into it. It surely promises peace.

The arch is full of her blood, yes,
but that pours out as easily as soup from a ladle.

The doves, their claws still dusty with kitchen-;ash,
brought me a knife hammered out of a diamond.

It is so thin
that a whisper will shatter it,
but so sharp
that the flesh it cleaves
believes itself whole.

Give me your toe.
I am the gentle one, remember?
I would not hurt you.

Please, we are sisters;
out of the same white wood
did our father hew our hearts.
Do this thing for me
your sister is afraid of the man
who loves her so much
he cannot tell her from any other.

Cinderella by Charles Folkard.
Be silent—
so shall I.

IV.

Is there not another daughter in this house?

My hand is cold and heavy in his. The shoe
is full as a spoon, their blood
bright as blisters. My foot
glides noiseless in
on that slick scarlet track.

He tastes of dead gold.

My skin is tiger-#8203;#8203;supple,
there are emeralds in my hair,
pearls on my fingers
a thin ivory crown on my head.
I am loved; I am polished.

From my hook in the hall,
I can see the gardens.

Catherynne M. Valente

Past the Rivers

I sat as if a statue,
and Hades brushed my hair
with a comb of iron and asphodel.

I sat as if an icon,
and Demeter brushed my hair
with a comb of crocus and water.

On either side of my candled body,
they held out my hair like wings,
and ran their fingers through it,
oars through black and separate rivers.

And Hades' hand was on my knee, saying:

You are safe here,
where we have brought you.

And Demeter's arms were close on mine, saying:

We only meant the dark
to be a quiet pool
where we can whisper
and remain unheard.

The sky is so bright, and so brazen.

Catherynne M. Valente

The Descent of the Corn-Queen of the Midwest

Hades is a place I know in Ohio,
at the bottom of a long, black stair
winding down I-76 from Pennsylvania,
winding down the weeds
through the September damp
and that old tangled root system
of asphalt and asphodel,
to the ash-fields,
clotted with fallen acorns
like rain puddled in fibrous pools.

Dead hands dice onions there
on an old oak cutting board,
dead hands spackled by iron rings,
by jewels, red and dark,
set into the skin like liver-spots,
and all these white curls are piled before me,
old fingernails cairn-stacked.

It is quiet in the Underworld, and every night
stews and cakes and wine appear on cedar tables,
served by slender hands that promise
no harm, no harm
could ever come from eating these rich and
shining things.
Someone has tracked crocus petals all through the house,
a ruin of purple —
and I cannot recall if I am allowed,
in this place,
to walk on it.

Don't you know these are your fruits?
Don't you know these are your flowers?

The pomegranates are not ripe yet,
but Ascalaphus talks shop with me
at the Farmer's Market,
shows me Empress plums,
papaya and mint sprigs,
a nice Japanese pear tree of his own breed,
heavy with colorless fruit.

The grafting process is difficult,
like wedding flesh to flesh,
and there is so much blood.

Eat.
Eat.
Don't you know these are your fruits?
Don't you know these are your flowers?

If they notice the wheat clinging to my heels,
if they are embarrassed by shreds of California

hanging from my skin like prayer flags,
they say nothing. The dead
can wait —

by March I will glitter like them,
my flesh a nest of stones.

Now they stir at silver pots in silence,
ladling broth over dumplings,
lips moving over incantations I cannot hear,
fingers brushing my hair as if,
when last I was here,
they had forgotten to tell me some secret thing.

Eat.
Eat.

They tell me the river burned here once —
the dead do not see where they are,
they think that snarl of water is the Cuyahoga,
they think that heave of grey is Erie,
but I see, I see it,
the Phlegethon boiling into gasoline,
braceleting the Acherusian Lake, where limbs like gasping
reach up out of the wet, clutching quarters,
Kennedy half-dollars,
pennies splashing from their blue-palmed grip.

I see it, the smoke unfolding like a manuscript,
and fire like faces in the deep.

Don't you know these are your fruits?
Don't you know these are your flowers?

Catherynne M. Valente

The Melancholy of Mechagirl

for Dmitri and Jeannine

X Prefecture drive time radio
trills and pops
its pink rhinestone bubble tunes—
pipe that sound into my copper-riveted heart,
that softgirl/brightgirl/candygirl electrocheer gigglenoise
right down through the steelfrown tunnels of my
all-hearing head.

Best stay
out of my way
when I've got my groovewalk going. It's a rhythm
you learn:
move those ironzilla legs
to the cherry-berry vanillacream sparklepop
and your pneumafuel efficiency will increase
according to the Yakihatsu formula (σ^3 , 9 to the power of four)

Robots are like Mars: they need
girls.

Boys won't do;
the memesoup is all wrong. They stomp
when they should kiss
and they're none too keen
on having things shoved inside them.

You can't convince them
there's nothing kinky going on:
you can't move the machine without IV interface
fourteen intra-optical displays
a codedump wafer like a rose petal
under the tongue,
silver tubes
wrapped around your bones.

It's just a job.
Why do boys have to make everything
sound weird? It's not a robot
until you put a girl inside. Sometimes
I feel like that.
A junkyard
the Company forgot to put a girl in.

I mean yeah.
My crystal fingers are laser-enabled
light comes out of me
like dawn. Bright orangecream
killpink
sizzling tangerine deathglitter. But what
does it mean? Is this really
a retirement plan?

All of us Company Girls
sitting in the Company Home

in our giant angular titanium suits
knitting tiny versions of our robot selves
playing poker with xray eyes
crushing the tea kettle with hotlilac chromium fists
every day at 3?

I get a break
every spring.

 Big me
powers down
transparent highly conductive golden eyeball
by transparent highly-conductive golden eyeball.

 Little me steps out
and the plum blossoms quiver
like a frothy fuchsia baseline.

 My body is
 full of holes
where the junkbody metalgirl tinkid used to be
inside me inside it
and I try to go out for tea and noodles
but they only taste like crystallized cobalt-4
and faithlessness.

I feel my suit
all around me. It wants. I want. Cold scrapcode
 drifts like snow behind my eyes.

I can't understand
why no one sees the dinosaur bones
of my exo-self
dwarfing the ramen-slingers
and their steamscaled cheeks.

 Maybe I go dancing
 Maybe I light incense.
 Maybe I fuck, maybe I get fucked.

Nothing is as big inside me
as I am
when I am inside me.

 When I am big
I can run so fast
out of my skin
my feet are mighty,
flamecushioned and undeniable.
 I salute with my sadgirl/hardgirl/crunchgirl
purplebolt tungsten hands
the size of cars
 and Saturn tips a ring.

It hurts to be big
but everyone sees me.

 When I am little

when I am just a pretty thing
and they think I am bandaged
to fit the damagedgirl fashionpop manifesto
instead of to hide my nickelplate entrance nodes
well

I can't get out of that suit either
but it doesn't know how to vibrate
a building under her audioglass palm
until it shatters.

I guess what I mean to say is
I'll never have kids. Chances for promotion
are minimal and my pension
sucks. That's ok.

After all, there is so much work
to do. Enough for forever.

And I'm so good at it.

All my sitreps shine

like so many platinum dolls.

I'm due for a morphomod soon—

I'll be able to double over at the waist

like I've had something cut out of me

and fold up into a magentanosed Centauri-capable spaceship.

So I've got that going for me.

At least fatigue isn't a factor. I have a steady

decalescent greengolden stream

of sourshimmer stimulants

available at the balling of my toes.

On balance, to pay for the rest

well

you've never felt anything

like a pearlypink ball of plasmid clingflame

releasing from your mouth

like a burst of song.

And Y Prefecture

is just so close by.

The girls and I talk.

We say:

start a dream journal.

take up ikebana.

make your own jam.

We say:

Next spring

let's go to Australia together

look at the kangaroos.

We say:

turn up that sweet vibevox happygirl music

tap the communal PA

we've got a long walk ahead of us today

and at the end of it

a fire like six perfect flowers

arranged in an iron vase.

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The Secret of Being a Cowboy

Did I ever tell you I used to be a cowboy?
It's true.

Had a horse name of Drunk Bob
a six shooter
called Witty Rejoinder.

And I tell you what,
Me and Bob and Witty
we rode the fucking range.

This thing here is two poems and one's about proper shit
mythic, I guess, just the way you like it and the other one
isn't much to look at, mostly about what a horse smells like
when he's been slurping up Jack and ice from the trough.

The first poem goes like this:

A few little-known facts about cowboys:

Most of us are girls.
Obsolescence does not trouble us.
We have a dental plan.

What I can tell you is cows smell like office work and
the moon looks like Friday night and the paycheck just cashed
rolling down to earth like all the coins
I ever earned.

Drunk Bob he used to say to me:
son, carrying you's no hurt--
it's your shadow weighs me down.

That, and your damned singing.

And Witty she'd chuckle
like the good old girl she was,
with a cheeky spin of her barrel
she'd whistle:

boy, just gimme a chance
I'll knock your whole world down.

Me and Bob and Witty,
we rode town to town and sometimes we had cattle
and sometimes we didn't and that's just how it lies.
Full-time cowboy employment is a lot like being a poet.
It's a lot of time spent on your lonesome in the dark
and most folks don't rightly know
what it is you do
but they're sure as shot they could manage it
just about as well as you.

Some number of sweethearts come standard with the gig,

though never too much dough.
They dig the clothes, but they can't shoot for shit,
and they damn sure don't want to hear your poems.
That's all right.
I got a heart like a half bottle
of no-label whiskey.
Nothing to brag on,
but enough for you, and all your friends, too.

I quit the life
for the East Coast and a novel I never could finish.
A book's like a cattle drive--you pound back and forth over the same
ugly patch of country until you can taste your life seeping out
like tin leeching into the beans
but it's never really over.

Drunk Bob said:
kid, you were the worst ride I had
since Pluto said: Bob, we oughta get ourselves a girl.

And Witty whispers: six, baby, count them up and just like that
we're in the other poem, which is how we roll
on the glory-humping, dust-gulping, ever-loving range.
Some days you can't even get a man to spit in your beer
and some you crack open your silver gun
and there's seeds there like blood already freezing
ready to stand tall at high midnight
ready to fire so fucking loyal, so sweet,
like every girl who ever said no
turning around at once and opening their arms.

And your honor's out on the table, all cards hid.
And by your honor I mean my honor,
and by my honor I mean everything in me, always, forever,
everything in a body that knows
what to do with six ruby bullets
and a horse the color of two in the morning.

That knows when the West tastes like death and an old paperback
you saddle your shit and ride East,
when you're done with it all you don't put down roots
and Drunk Bob says: come on, son, you've got that book to write
and I know a desk in the dark with your name on it.
And Witty old girl she sighs: you know what you have to do.
Seeds fire and bullets grow and I'm the only one who's ever loved you.
That horse can go hang.
And I say: maybe I'll get an MFA
and be King of the Underworld
in some sleepy Massachusetts town.

And all the while my honor's tossed into the pot
and by my honor I mean your honor

or else what's this all about? Drunk Bob
never did know where this thing was going
but I guess the meat of it is how Bob is strong and I am strong
and Witty is a barrel of futures, and we are all of us
unstopping, unending, unbeginning:
we keep moving. You gotta keep moving.
Six red bullets will show the way down.

We all have to bring the cows in.

I am here to tell you
we are all of us just as mighty as planets--and you too,
we'll let you in, we've got stalwart to spare--
but you might have to sleep on the floor.

Me and Bob and Witty just
clap on and the gun don't soften
and the horse don't bother me with questions,
all of us just heading toward the red rhyme of the sunset
and the door at the bottom of the verse.

The secret of being a cowboy is
never sticking around too long and honor
sometimes looks like a rack of bones
still standing straight up at the end of both poems.

Catherynne M. Valente