

Classic Poetry Series

Catherynne M. Valente
- poems -

Publication Date:

2012

Publisher:

Poemhunter.com - The World's Poetry Archive

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](#) 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 artists, and her novel *The Girl Who Circumnavigated Fairyland in a Ship of Her Own Making* was

the first 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)□

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

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

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

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

2009World Fantasy Award Nominee (Best Short Story)

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

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

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

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

2010Focus Awards (nominee) - "Palimpsest"

2010Lambda Literary Awards - "Palimpsest"

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-³supple,
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?

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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
clop 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