

# **Unwife**

**by**

**Sharon Ashton**

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## Foreword

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That I do not feel now as I did then  
does not make the poem less true.

## A Coat of Human Skins

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### *Stropped-beak Fortune*

*Swoops, making the air gasp, tearing the crest off one,  
Setting it down bleeding on the next. Seamus Heaney*

The woman you love now needs a fine coat,  
cleverly wrought  
to cover her hollow body  
shrunken by fourteen months of fasting  
which I had thought a last sacrificial gift  
for her dying lover,  
but understand now it mouthed her screaming  
'Look at me, look at me, look at me.  
He is dying, but look at me.  
See how my breasts are disappearing.'  
She knew you were looking  
She was on the look-out  
She said: 'I can't show my legs. I look like Bambi.'  
How you laughed 'Bambi? Bambi, Bambi...'

The woman you love now needs a fine coat,  
cleverly wrought  
to warm her shallow body.  
Many are paying for it,  
though no one, except perhaps you, wants to.  
We do not know the full cost;  
we do not know how long it will take;  
we do not know how many skins are required,  
but we know each skin must be peeled from the living.

The woman you love now needs a fine coat  
cleverly wrought from human skin  
to cover her cadaverous body.  
Some skins are easier to cut than others:

brothers and sisters, loved though seen only once a year,  
yield sheer squares of surface cells from a distance,  
their cries fading through telephone lines, e-mails and texts.  
But squames of wife and daughters will not come cleanly.  
Blood clings.  
Flayed-flesh screams fill rooms and slide down walls  
to stain the coat of the woman you love now.

## Medea

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In the first fury I would have set a match to her;  
watched you while she screamed  
like a witch at the stake,  
flesh bubbling, hair sparking outwards;  
a Catherine Wheel.

In the first fury I would have let our girls  
fall out of the chariot,  
deaf to their screams  
and the crack of their heads  
on the paving stones below.

In the first fury I would not have harmed you  
Beloved,  
needing you to live these deaths.  
But now I want only to pull the girls in beside me  
and go to another country.

## Prometheus

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*Do not be your own vulture; high on some mountain  
shelf  
Huddle the pitiless abstractions bald about the neck  
Who will descend when you crumple in the plains a  
wreck. Louis MacNeice*

I have locked my torture in a file named 'Betrayed'  
e-mails I should not have seen  
new love and new sex detailed with dates and times I was not here  
and a story written for me by the two of you:  
that I did not love you  
that we could not make each other happy  
that those who condemn you are only jealous  
that when I find a love like yours  
I will I let you go.  
But this is not my story.  
My story is of pain recurring,  
innards torn out, torn apart;  
a fresh bleed each time the file is opened.

## Ariadne

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Again and again I lit windows  
so that you could find your way home  
after fighting monsters.  
But something shifted;  
the lights led you to a place you could not call home.  
I was not enough;  
the girls were not enough.  
And now you say to me: sorry, but this is how it has to be.  
And friends say: take a holiday, drink some wine, you might meet someone.

## Trojan Horse

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What gifts she brought us  
in tissue and carrier-bags from the best London shops:  
bath salts scented with Sicilian lemons,  
tasteful calendars of Italy and Paris,  
little ginger biscuits in a terracotta and silver cylinder.

What gifts she brought me:  
a grammar school book on the Renaissance,  
a green and magenta silk scarf coiled like a snake,  
a shiny book on Italian villas and gardens,  
scarlet tulips she painted herself on silk.

What gifts she carried in her belly  
to breach our life.  
And when her belly was emptied  
and you thrust yourself inside  
our house burned.

## Scent

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You want us to be civilised, amicable,  
because of the girls  
and because we have been friends for over thirty years.  
You tell me there are things you share with me you don't share with her.  
You tell me we could meet Monday evenings, have supper, watch rugby  
(she has no interest in rugby)

I tell you it can't be like this  
but I don't tell you about the scent she has laid down on you  
like a cat urinating on its bedding,  
and how it wafts through the room when you come in,  
making me want to back away; cower in the corner.

## Big Cats

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Fool to have played your game, knowing full well  
I had only to smile at the same time  
as you to conjure some unspoken link  
between us and pass the unspoken test  
of spoken words: 'You think that? I do too,  
isn't that funny? You should... and we ought...'  
I knew then I'd become one of the pack,  
answered and felt for, groomed and secret-less.  
And I don't know if it's like this between  
males, but suspect it's unique to females,  
requiring as it does the listening,  
watching and sniffing I've seen at the Zoo;  
staring through fences at lionesses  
draped over bleached branches of long-dead trees.

## Alchemy

---

How does it change, the love you feel?  
What turns a longing to sleep mouth against mouth,  
breathing in and out the other's breath,  
to rolling away to the edge of the bed for fear of touching?  
How do limbs so loved twist into a cage?  
The voice that made you strong diminish you?  
How does a familiar car glimpsed in the High Street  
make you retch and find another way home?  
And in your dreams, how does the one you loved become a monster?  
Silent and always with his back turned to you?

## Medusa

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This morning she walked past the building.  
She may have been doing this for weeks, but I haven't seen her.  
I recognised the hair and hands flicked out like a doll.  
I don't know if she looked up at the window  
because I was curled up on the floor; a child again  
hiding from gypsies who came each year with the fair;  
came down our street selling pegs and lavender;  
came to the window if we didn't answer the door.  
And mum was whispering to my sister and me  
'Get down, get down, if they see us they'll curse us.'

## **Amitriptyline Dreams**

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Are filled with ghosts  
and knives slashing hearts  
and extra-long matches  
scraped down Christmas boxes  
pretty with scenes of snow  
each little flame cupped  
and dropped onto shirts  
left by you in your rush to be with her  
doused now in petrol and rammed  
through your new letterbox.

## Nights

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When I cannot sleep  
the ghost of her not-long dead love  
comes beckoning,  
drawing me through the front door  
(un-bolted in case you come home)  
and out into the sodium-yellow street.  
There are many paths,  
but always we turn left, then right,  
re-tracing the short-cut  
(as though time were short)  
that you and I would take  
those nights we went to watch him die  
(nights you went to watch her, and she you)  
And I know ghosts have no answers,  
but still I ask him if he knew.

## **Adrift**

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I understand now  
you were waiting  
for a boat  
to sail towards ours,  
ripple the long-dull water  
and moor beside us  
so you could safely  
climb down the rope  
and board her.

## **Unwife**

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First you must force the ring from her second left finger  
and place it on the right.

Next take a sharp blade  
and cut from her all that was for you.

Do this quickly,  
in a single slicing action,  
then leave her  
to heal as best she can.

## **Division of the Spoils**

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Before this fracture  
this splintering of bone  
this parting of flesh  
all we had belonged to one person  
made of you and me.  
So how will it be decided  
who gets what?

## Afterword

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Every day now we must walk these ruins;  
picking our way through fragments  
(some so tiny it is hard to know where they once belonged)  
our stomachs churning at things loved before, now detritus:  
books, pictures, embroidered cotton bed sheets, a cat.  
Stopped dead by hearts still pulsing and limbs of daughters  
we breathe in and out, calm ourselves and search for a different path.  
In time moss, ivy, even poppies can grow to soften jagged edges,  
but how will we fit the pieces together then?  
How will we remember what was here before?

