

Thief

Poems and Prose

Bianca Bowers



Other books by Bianca Bowers

Poetry

Death and Life (Paperfields Press, 2014)

Passage (Paperfields Press, 2015)

Love is a Song She Sang From a Cage (Paperfields Press,
2016)

Pressed Flowers (Paperfields Press, 2017)

Butterfly Voyage (Paperfields Press, 2018)

Fiction

Cape of Storms (Auteur Books, 2019)

THIEF

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Introduction

Poetry frequently warrants an element of autobiography. Broadly, it conveys a truth not produced in fiction. You may find yourself, when reading some of these pieces, with an urge to reach out to the poet, such is their evocatively traumatic content. Yet it is the heartbreak and despair of writer's block that is at the core of much of this verse.

Taking a deeper dive, the tragedy of regret is captured in poems such as 'Time' and 'Spiteful', the latter an impressively devastating piece where even what little resolution offered in the poem plays into the mood of futility. The former piece, meanwhile, seems to provide a little more hope to the poet-narrator and their reader.

It would be fair to suggest that many of these compositions have a kind of multi-level profundity, and that some of them are rewarded with a little research or outside-the-book insight. 'Rome' is paid off with a little knowledge about the Roman poetess Sulpicia, whom Bowers draws on in the piece. However, the interludes in the collection that may require a little study are few and far between; the work stands more than adeptly on its own.

While not frustratingly difficult to decipher, these poems

can also be consumed in a variety of senses – literal, figurative, and metaphorical. For instance, ‘Ketamine’ could be interpreted as clever interplay between the poet and a drug-addled object of affection, or perhaps a dismissal of concepts such as the unacknowledged anonymity, and the lack of recognition for talent, that plagues many an artistic temperament, or it might be a simple meditation on unrequited love. The beauty of many of these poems is that they have more than one interpretation – and, as the postmodernists have suggested in the past – reader interpretation is as significant as authorial intent.

The reader can rely on their own life experiences to plumb the psychological depths explored throughout this rich collection. There is much to examine, admire and address here, such as male-female relationships, the loss of inspiration, and insights on the quiet resolve of emotional breakdown that frequently takes place, rather than a more outward and chaotic relinquishing of control that is more often warranted at such times.

Gender dynamics are crucial to some of the work. Felatio features in a couple of the compositions, in part to convey how one-sided this sexual transaction can be. One could argue too that there is an undercurrent of pushback from the sanctity of domestic bliss and its associated setting – it’s tautologous to say that women have historically borne the brunt of home-making exertion in the Rich North, toiling with little reward,

frequently contending with alcoholic husbands keen to spend all their wages in the pub. Similar scenarios continue to play out in the Poor South. Indeed, with absentee fathers and broken families, they are still all too common in the West. Some of the pieces here could be – at the very least – visceral ventures that explore rebellion against and rejection of the status quo of the nuclear family.

As with much great work of its kind, these compositions require and reward more than one reading. Ultimately, the poems are extremely satisfying on intellectual and emotional levels, many of them expressing a range of processes that include solipsism, existential despair, heartbreak, and love.

—Richard Gibney

Where have the words gone?

April 2019

From a seaside grave, windswept and littered
with dead petals, I ask
where have the words gone?

Did I leave a billabong
syllables near Cedar
creek, did I crush my mother
tongue underfoot, the crater's lip
heavy with thought

Did I pin epitaphs to baobabs
when dreaming, Africa's cradle doused
Kerosene, burning the past
in a shaman's fire

Did I forfeit the alphabet
first degree burns, a dark-haired stranger
in his eyes, tinder, in his heart
begging me, to strike a match

All over again, I can't remember
where I left off, while disturbing the universe
so carelessly

Mathematics

16 August 2019

It is August sixteenth
and I am fuller than I wish to be
Winter has crept inside me
with the stealth of a spy

I let my forty fifth birthday pass
three days ago
without so much as a wink
Like a crowd of strangers
I spurned its presence, glued my eyes to the floor

The full moon coincided with it all
I shed blood, reflecting moreover
on that inconvenient hourglass that will soon dry up
along with any superficial beauty
I might have possessed once
upon a summer ago

But as I write this pathetic account
of a woman falling
short of her adolescent expectations
the soft afternoon sun is warm in my cheerful writing
room
and I hear:
my son, watching *Stranger Things*

my daughter, singing over Billie Eilish
my husband, haggling with Optus, and

These anxieties
that graze my knees
cripple my muscles, on occasion
are so insignificant in the grander scheme
of a boundless soul in a finite body
and I ask myself, how long

'til you live fully?
before you die, piecemeal?
When you're forty-six or fifty?
When you weigh what you did at twenty?
When you write a book that pays for a roof?

and I think to myself, perhaps
It has nothing and everything
to do with mathematics
For as long as life is a calendar,
a scale,
a calculator...
this human can never truly be happy.

Tattooist

| May 2020

I remember poetry
a classroom
I gatecrashed

English roses
with alabaster names
—Elisabeth, Anne
Emily, Jane

placing words—
undulating, tangerine—on loose leaf
as delicately as pink fish
roe on cream sashimi

while crimson wasps swarmed
my throat and fingers, welted
More tattooist
than poet

☆ On my way to visit you

13 November 2020

On my way to visit you, wildflowers of every hue peeked out from grassy clumps and tree stumps, wire fences and box hedges. The white stigma of the fuchsia bougainvillea resembled eyes as I passed by—*the big brother of the plant kingdom*, I thought. The rainbow eucalyptus near the swings is shedding bark, and the channel-billed cuckoos are back from Papua New Guinea for the summer. I hear them all the time, even at night when the frogmouth calls and the stone curlews hiss and screech at the red fox that stalks the undergrowth beneath the water pipes.

Last week I saw a kookaburra swoop across a blanket of Singapore daisies and extract a juvenile carpet python with its beak. The unsuspecting reptile didn't stand a chance. Speaking of close encounters, my daughter narrowly escaped stepping on an eastern brown snake while walking alongside a billabong yesterday, and then my rescue hound, Honey, had a close call with a cane toad, nearly ingesting its deadly toxin. Cane toads are a blight on the natural environment and a threat to wildlife. Queensland sugar cane farmers introduced the toads from South America before environmental factors were in vogue. Cane toad numbers are now in the millions and impossible to control,

because there are no natural predators. I've heard a rumour, though, and seen the odd sign, that there is a river rat who has adapted and learnt to kill the toad by flipping it onto its back and driving claws into its heart, cleverly avoiding the toad's toxic glands on its back. Nature is constantly fascinating!

Since I last visited, the young tulipwood trees, planted by the council, are offering shade and I'm pleased to report zero incidents of vandalism by the so-called tunnel-snake-teens. Oh, and did I tell you that a pair of ravens have chosen to build a nest in the mountain gum tree that towers over our pitched roof? I throw a chicken carcass every few days and they drag it into the secret garden and pick it bare in minutes. Knowing my reverence for those black-feathered birds, you can imagine my delight each day as I peer up into the sky and know that raven magic is literally breeding in my backyard. I expect it will usher in the change of fortune that has already begun.

For most of my 45th year, I pointedly scrunched up my dreams—such pretty pieces of paper, decorated with cursive and art, fed like expired waste to the yellow wheelie bin. That same year, I tried to remove my heart too, but its violet veins stubbornly clung to their crimson chamber. Still, I resigned myself to never love again—citing silliness and old age as perfectly valid,

if not legally binding, reasons. I could blame circumstances for getting the better of me that year, but a one-sided story is no better than a bare-faced lie. Now, in my 46th year, that long desert night is miraculously tapering off. If you look close enough you will see a scattering of tiny buds breaking forth on the horizon. I am starting to blossom again.

I think of you often; I thought you might like to know. But thinking about you and seeing you is the difference between jacaranda trees before and after October. Before, their bare branches and grey trunks blend into the landscape to such an extent that they might as well be invisible. Until one morning in October, you wake up to see clusters of purple petals adorning those nondescript trees of September.

Between visits, I am a nondescript tree, but today, on my way to visit you, I am that glorious jacaranda that turns heads and induces smiles, and I dare hope that you feel the same way.

I am at the gate now, picking up a rusted Coca-Cola tin and smelling the jasmine flowers as a gush of wind rushes down the hill. Soon I will be walking up the driveway checking your citrus trees for signs of fruit. If you are in the kitchen, put the kettle on. I have in my possession an ornate tin brimming with cloudberry tea

leaves; I will brew us a fresh pot.

Bianca xo

In the Land of Chagall

21 January 2021

Goats bobbed on the ocean
Fish clambered over mountains
The daytime sky wore a navy blue coat—
 silver stars, bright as suns,
 glistened on its hemline

Everything was out of place, and simultaneously exactly where it should be.

My ruby red heart was planted in the body of a man
who was destined to love me
The seeds of his sorrow had flourished into happy buds
and my own rib cage was home to climbing yellow
flowers.

He did not recognise me when I kissed his cheek
but a memory stirred and his eyes shone like the sun
that should have been

 He asked me if we'd met before

 “Yes and no,” I said.

 He cocked his head and drank me in with curious
eyes. “How can that be?”

 “We are the dreams that float above human souls,
waiting, always waiting on them to choose love over
fear.”

His expression cast a shadow while he thought about it. “Are you saying that we, you and I, are destined to be together?”

I nodded.

“But?”

“But our humans are like lotus roots mired in deep mud, and they cannot see what awaits them.”

He inched closer and touched my cheek. “What can we do to help them?”

“We’re not supposed to interfere, but my human is close to a breakthrough and it is not against the rules to nudge her.”

“How can we nudge them?” he said.

“Take my hand and walk with me to the garden under the sea.”

“The garden under the sea? I have not heard of this place, yet it sounds so familiar.”

I picked a yellow flower from my rib cage and a pink bud from his heart. “These pink flowers were seeds of sorrow once upon a time, and these yellow flowers that bloom each morning and close each night are a reminder of the eternal sun that always rises and sets, no matter what.”

“You know about my sorrow?”

I nodded. “Yes, I was there when the flower of life saved your broken heart. And I have been waiting for you to heal and return to me.”

Tears pricked his eyes as realisation dawned. “You mean, you are she?”

I nodded again.

He dropped to his knees and wrapped his arms around my thighs. “You left me in the physical world, but you have been waiting for me in this spirit realm.”

I placed my hands on his shoulders. “Yes.”

He looked up at me. “If only I had known. I would have healed faster and found my way back to you earlier. Why did I wait so long? Why did I try to kill myself instead of heal?”

I touched his cheek. “My love, do not berate yourself. The human world is a veil and not a mirror. Life unfolds at its own pace. We cannot rush it, or compete with it, or cheat it.”

He stood up and dried his eyes. I reached for his hand and our fingers intertwined.

“Come,” I said. “Let us go now, to the garden under the sea, where the flower of life waits for us to pluck a petal of renewal.”

We walked down the hill, hand in hand. Blue crabs scurried in and out of green blades of grass. Ravens bobbed on the waves and whales swam in the sky. My rib cage was a ball of sunshine. His heart was bursting with fuchsia flowers. Everything was out of place and simultaneously exactly where it was supposed to be.

Gold Finch

5 February 2021

A gold finch flew into my mind
during lunch
Willing to trade a ruby feather
for breadcrumbs and cheddar

And as I held that feather, I thought about birds,
wild and caged:

*Was poetry a caged bird with clipped wings, or
was I a bird who had forgotten how to fly?*

Had the gold finch always been there—
suspended in time
silent and grounded
surviving within the confines of my own head?

And with the gold finch flew the question:

*What is a poem but a moment
and what is a poet but a curator of that moment?*

Indeed, have I lost the phenomenon of moments
or have I been flying above every moment
instead of settling now and then?

Though I know the answer already
I will settle on the branch of this moment
and ponder it a little longer.

Tempo Rubato

4 April 2021

Chopin's wistful notes drift
along night's collarbone

like waylaid smoke
an exposed tune,
 in sync with the vulnerability that haunts my
fingers,
hovers

The days, nights and seasons have stretched
longer than solstice
and fallen now, like brittle leaves
Mourning is threadbare

My bird-like wrists have grown hollow
twigs without wings
the corner of my eye accumulates
doubt builds beneath
dusty keys of an Underwood

Poetry has never left before—
always incessant;
an endless, restless ocean
Churning and turning
Now, it is quiet

heavy as the dead sea
And though I try to anchor them
with dread and desperation, my fingers float
to the surface

Through billowing lace curtains, I watch
the pianist's passion
So delicate, his ferocity,
unrivalled
I permit myself to inhale
the intoxicating scent of longing
forbidden and repressed inside me
deeper than dermis,
deeper than the sea,
deeper than this haunting dream
But now, surfacing

like an anchor, untethered
it floats into view
Waiting,
for that dramatic moment when the muse and I be-
come tangled and suspended
Tempo rubato
So that I can whisper back
with lyrical words and renewed appreciation
for this gift, called poetry
for this velvet throne, called poet
For this illusive state, called Be(e)ing

that I rejected, denied, took for granted

The pianist hunches his angular features,

pauses

Silence prickles my skin with goose bumps

Then,

an exhaustive exhale

before the exquisite music of my heart

unravels

like yarn in my hands

Time

24 April 2021 at 13:26

Time hangs on a clothesline
Snagged by a peg
it wriggles and writhes
But I don't set it free
like I would a dragonfly or a bee
I tell it to be still
I tell it to contemplate this moment of powerlessness
when it's expending every effort to progress, to suc-
ceed, to evolve, to heal—
only to be snagged by an invisible peg

And I tell it:

time is no friend

while you flail and fail

like a helpless insect in a spider's web

And I ask time a question; I give time an ultimatum:
I say, "Time, if I set you free from that peg, will you
help unsnag me from my past failures and limita-
tions?"

To which time replies: "You don't need my help. I have
seen your future, and the only thing you need is to
believe in yourself."

Karma

25 June 2021

Her roots were never in question
It was the life inside her head that undulated like
hooked bait in a busy river

Fuelled by karma, he never let her go
Even if it meant bottling and preserving
the surface like fruit, even if it meant
pickling the waters of his intuition

And though she tried to tell him
She knew not how to love
a figment of her heart, She knew not
how to love him below the waterline
of longing

Where she once drowned so enthusiastically
Where she once sunk like an ill-fated wreck

Spiteful

30 January 2022 at 23:37

The sky is dark tonight
Moonless in every sense

True love is a fairytale
and I am no princess with a happy ending

I have never confessed to being lonely
But I must confess that I am lonely now

There is little left from my choices
besides regret
Regret that I have wasted so much time pretending
to be happy, pretending
to agree, pretending
to be someone else, pretending

I pull a raven's feather from my mouth
I have choked on this black heart long enough
A century of deceit is not enough payback
for the life I have wasted on my own destruction
Torture
at each point of the compass

All that's left is a grave
shallow enough to rescue time, but deep

enough to bury the curse
on this life, the last life, and any future lives
that fester beneath karma's skin

When the moon is missing from its place in the sky
I am lonely,
and fate seems so spiteful

Ketamine

23 January 2022

I wonder who lives behind his smile
Is there blood in his thoughts
when choosing coffee over conversation?

I wonder if he's sedated
—a cocktail of halcion and ketamine
and if he sees me tripping

on stardust from another planet
How could he not see
me disappear

a crater of loneliness
How could he not know
love is a drug

and I am high all the fucking time

R_{ome}

28 February 2022

within, at the edge of the world
Sulpicia fell. A seed of love,
or its doppelgänger, planted
between ribs, tendrils of longing
Belonging

beneath reflections
Cerinthus left
so many pretty flowers
inside Rome's ageing body
A colosseum no longer
crumbling,
the gladiator's legacy exhumed

Inside, she grew taller
than yesterday
Taller than the morning
Taller than the words she had spoken and kept

Like dormant cicadas, words broke forth
from their dream, from their sleep, from their dark
night of the soul
At last, they broke free,
she broke free

Because of C—
she emerged, in a garden of butterflies
Because of C—
she was no longer museum
with wanting walls; something to admire,
forget

Because of C
because of C
because of C
She plucked wild flowers from roots
and soaked petals in fragrant hope

Russia

3 March 2022 at 04:21

While Russia invaded the Ukraine, I underwent my own invasion. An invasion I didn't resist. An invasion I happily submitted to. For that invader was not an external military force advancing to conquer and colonise me. The invader was an internal part of myself that I had repressed and silenced by staying quiet, by settling for everything I didn't want, for saying yes when I meant no. Until that day in the car—my mouth on his cock, his hand on my head, pushing me closer to the woman inside. Except she was no longer woman. She was a child soldier turned warlord, returning for a reckoning to reclaim what I stole.

“A life for a life,” she said. “No longer will our body be a coffin; an upright container for quiet deaths. No longer will I conceal bullets and casings to hide your violence. No longer will I swallow your silent screams to save the world from our grief. No longer, woman. No longer, child.”

Quiet Deaths

11 March 2022

Poetry died. Not a violent death; the same death as mine—quiet and without a shadow. Here one day, gone the next. And before I knew it, the well of words, that had once overflowed, was empty, bone dry. And like time—slipping away as water slides off skin—poetry and I slipped into the void; her, missing for three years, and me, missing for twenty.

Why are these internal deaths so quiet?

Isn't violence supposed to be loud and uncompromising? A Piercing scream that penetrates the skin of everything. Blood spilling and spurting like monsoon rain. Anguish. Pain. Breaking. Coming undone. Fracturing. Dismantling. Kali. Shiva.

Isn't that what violence is?

Why then, did I die so quietly? Why did I swallow tears, force them down, like a woman forces a cock down her throat, like she swallows to please not herself, but her oppressor, her keeper, her object of desire?

I don't want another quiet death to take place inside

my body. I don't want to hold my tongue, or my breath,
or my tears, or my grief, or my hope, or my loneliness,
or my longing, or my passion, or my self.

No more quiet deaths.

The next time there is violence, let it be loud and
bloody and vengeful. Let me feel the weight of it, pin-
ning me down, fucking me, sparing me nothing.

The next time there is violence, let it break me so un-
equivocally that my only option is to rebuild.

Drone

15 March 2022 at 12:39

My heart builds an empire
but my head is a drone

above the mist, a single strike

I shouldn't wonder about love
But I wonder, I wonder what to make

of this body of work, so few attempts
yet all of them, failures

Coffins and church bells
ringing and relenting

Loneliness repeating—
a pathetic refrain—

A shadow that can survive
the darkest solstice

I wanted to cure loneliness

18 March 2022

I wanted to cure loneliness
so I drove to the park and took a stranger's cock in my
mouth

But the body is merely a vessel
limited in its capacity to house
a grieving heart

And I leave semi-sated
painfully aware that loneliness
is still at home in the passenger seat

Exit Wound

19 March 2022

I wanted to deceive loneliness
so I burrowed into his exit wound

Inside his body, I butterflyed my heart
fed it to him, thinking he would choke on wings
before I reached his throat, loneliness was also a boy
with crooked teeth and a dead mother

During the war, love was a weapon I cocked
between my legs, he was a white flag
razing old battlefields, fought and lost
in the year of the tiger, I fell into green hazel

lines, a palm tattooed by voices
heartbeats behind, ahead I'm old enough
to know prayers become wounds, but I prayed
a primal tongue, between prayers I prayed

for spillage, a love to haemorrhage and bleed
into a body, uninhabitable by loneliness

End of my life

20 March 2022 at 13:50

on a park bench
opposite a river ravaged by floods

I spend the day with Ocean

and though he keeps me company
fills my belly with exquisite words
I feel lonelier, and hungrier than the homeless
man asleep on the grass

and though my emotional debris
is rising and breaching,
the high priestess,
whose incantations once converted pain
into pretty poems,
has cut out her tongue to spite her voice

and I sit on a park bench
neither river, nor ocean
contemplating how I will ever make it
to the end of my life without a body
of water, without another drop of rain

Drowning

2 April 2022

I sit here

Alone

in a room full of water

And it's true what they say about drowning

Everyone will see you flounder on the surface

but nobody will see you go under

END OF SAMPLE

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