

Mia You

## Mobilizing Still Life and Still Lives through Lyric

On “Rouse the Ruse and the Rush”

Managed and controlled by law, the reproduction of bodies is inextricably tied to the reproduction of language. Within contemporary debates on reproductive rights, it is worth interrogating how creativity informs the reworking, recycling, and rewriting of the terms we rely on to talk about (living and nonliving) bodies and personhood and how creativity has been and can be mobilized to direct those terms toward certain political ends. This is particularly true if, as this special section proposes, creativity is an “open process and dynamic presence of ongoing transformation” (Brillenburg Wurth, van der Tuin, and Verhoeff 2023: 60).

The poetic sequence that follows this essay, “Rouse the Ruse and the Rush,”<sup>1</sup> was written across 2020–21, and through the process of creative research, I was interested in thinking through one of the more audacious appropriations by the US American Right of leftist activist slogans: the employment of *my body, my choice* as a rallying cry against COVID-19 vaccine mandates and social-distancing guidelines. This long-standing shorthand for a woman’s right to reproductive justice and self-determination rose to prominence in the years preceding the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision, and it hardly seems a coincidence, as several commentators have noted, that the phrase was hijacked from this context just as several Republican-leaning state governments were ramping up efforts to limit or prohibit a woman’s right to terminate a pregnancy. *New York Times* columnist Michelle Goldberg (2021) observed: “When it comes to themselves, many conservatives find any encroachment on their physical sovereignty intolerable, and arguments about the common good irrelevant. Yet their movement is dragging us into a future where many women will be stripped of self-determination the moment they get pregnant.”

But, of course, this future was already the present. By spring 2022 most COVID-19-related guidelines had fallen out of collective practice across the United States, including any systemic demand to

be vaccinated. Simultaneously, the Supreme Court had concluded, according to Samuel Alito's draft decision on *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* leaked on May 2, 2022, that the right to terminate one's pregnancy is not included in the Fourteenth Amendment's protection of "liberty" and, further, that it is not a *private* matter, as it consequently destroys "fetal life" or—as the Mississippi law in question would have it—an "unborn human being" (*Politico* 2022). The Supreme Court's official decision, published on June 24, 2022, reinterpreted the precedents of *Roe* and *Planned Parenthood v. Casey* (1992) as attempts to "[strike] a particular balance" between the pregnant person's right to privacy and freedom to "make 'intimate and personal choices' that are 'central to personal dignity and autonomy'" *against* the "interests of . . . 'potential life.'"<sup>2</sup> The *Dobbs* decision adds, "Ordered liberty sets limits and defines the boundary between competing interests," as if the interests of the pregnant person and "potential life" can be assumed to be separate. In other words, once you are pregnant, it's not only *your* body (as you now share it with a "*competing interest*"), so it's not entirely your choice. Further, that shift from "fetal life" in the draft to "potential life" in the doctrine underscores that you don't even need to be pregnant but *potentially able* to be pregnant for elected representatives to regulate your reproductive function.

In this light, the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* could end up having terrifying consequences for pregnant, queer, and/or trans persons alike. But perhaps, as Charlotte Shane (2022) suggests in "The Right to Not Be Pregnant," the terms employed by *Roe* (privacy, choice) to establish the legality of abortion across the United States in the 1970s were also what set it up for inevitable reversal. "The failure of this rhetoric is all around us," Shane writes, delineating how "mainstream abortion-rights advocates maintained a myopic, reactive fixation on the language and frameworks employed by the state and by their opponents." Put simply, if we draw a line in the sand, I am unequivocally pro-choice. But I also believe that the trouble with US discourse around abortion rights across the last half century lies in how it is shaped by lines in the sand: "my body, my choice." But what are the limits of your body wherein lie the limits of your choice? As a poet-scholar concerned with how words migrate and the values they carry with them, and as someone influenced by revolutionary feminist thinking and practices, I am troubled by how discourse on both sides around reproductive justice continues to center on determining and distributing property and, thereby, personhood. Perhaps the emphatic assertion of both ownership and individualism in *my body, my choice* is also what primes it for use by both

the US Left and Right. As Elizabeth Lanphier (2021) points out, drawing from the research of economist Anjum Altaf: “‘My body, my choice’ suggests that because people own their bodies, they get to control them. In the reproductive rights realm, it is a slogan meant to empower. But it relies on a history of self-ownership that goes back to the early days of capitalism and the rise of private property,” or in other words, a history of equivalence between property and persons.

The application of the concept of private property to human bodies is naturally repellent in discussions about trafficking and enslavement, yet it is constantly validated and reinforced in assertions of empowerment. But even in such assertions of self-ownership (and ostensibly self-determination), the correlation of the body with property ultimately reinforces the authority of systems demanding every last aspect of our lives be delineated, divided, assessed, and commodified. The body is inevitably determined by the material conditions that give rise to it and surround and sustain or suppress it. The body is mobilized by these conditions, just as it mobilizes them (and other bodies). Bodily borders and boundaries, self-determination and self-protection: these are essential concepts to uphold, but the framework of private property has proven itself to be insufficient and, in fact, contradictory to this purpose. After all, how many of us truly believe in the realization of self-determination, for more than the elite few, at this stage of global capitalism? Furthermore, the current use of “personhood” to determine who or what is deserving of government-protected rights—including, of course, the property rights of their own bodies—is equally problematic and illusory. Is a fetus a person when it is viable outside the womb or at fifteen weeks? Is it a person at conception, or only once it fronts a corporation? “But,” Ellen Willis (2012: 207) writes, “fetal personhood is ultimately as inarguable as the existence of God; either you believe in it, or you don’t.”

Perhaps it’s time to move beyond the delineation and distribution of personhood and property as the basic terms of giving life. For most of my life, I have heard that to be pro-reproductive justice, one must toe the line that a fetus is not a person, and thus not a living body separate from the mother, until it is born—until it takes its first breath of air outside the mother’s body. But as someone who has had terminated pregnancies, both as and as not a deliberate choice, I have long felt this line isn’t quite right. Whatever that body was that I hosted, it wasn’t just an extra growth of my own tissue, and it wasn’t just an extension of my own personhood or private property. It was something *other*, because it was both something I could feel as invasive

and something I could mourn. It was something I continued to think about decades later and probably will continue thinking about for the rest of my life. As Gwendolyn Brooks (1963) writes in the poem “the mother”: “Abortions will not let you forget.”

In “Apostrophe, Animation, Abortion,” Barbara Johnson (1986: 33) criticizes the frequent reading of “the mother” as an anti-abortion poem, because “to see it as making a simple case for the embryo’s right to life is to assume that a woman who has chosen abortion does not have the right to mourn. It is to assume that no case for abortion can take the woman’s feelings of guilt and loss into consideration, that to take those feelings into account is to deny the right to choose the act that produced them.” Four decades after Johnson’s essay, I am not sure if we have progressed much further from this simple life/choice dichotomy, nor do I see feminist discourse on abortion and miscarriage finding enough solidarity with each other. Like Brooks, could I acknowledge such a loss and be frank about how it unquestionably affected the living that continued after it, while also maintaining, without question, that a universal right for women to choose when they give life, and when they don’t, is still more essential than such loss—that the question of fetal rights cannot be prioritized or “isolated from the question of women’s rights” (Willis 2012: 205)? After all, both an abortion and a miscarriage are bodily traumas; generally, however, I believe them to be far lesser traumas than carrying an unwanted, unviable pregnancy to term. The fact remains that neither are an autonomous choice, an expression of total free will, but rather the result of context, circumstances, and conditions, much of which an individual woman has no capacity to determine even as she finds herself at the center of them, forced to make *some* choice. Johnson (1986: 33) quotes from Carol Gilligan’s *In a Different Voice* (1982), “Believe that even in my deliberateness I was not deliberate,” and then elaborates, “believe that I can be subject and object of violence at the same time, believe that I have not chosen the conditions under which I must choose.”

An echo of Johnson echoing Gilligan occurs in “Rouse the Ruse and the Rush,” when I write, “who would choose / what we have to live / who would live / what we have to choose.” At this juncture of US history, when both collective health and reproductive justice are under unprecedented pressure, we must ask ourselves what, in this entanglement of lives and choices, should be the just terms for determining and distributing responsibility and, further, ownership. This is why I appreciate the idea suggested in the title of this special section of individuals mobilizing creativity as a collective resource, rather than creativity being something owned by individual “creators” or, even worse,

“creatives.” As the editors write in their introduction to “Mobilizing Creativity, Part 1”: “Creativity is a power that is everywhere—in us, among us, and around us in individual and social and in biological as well as cultural processes. As such, creativity can exceed sociohistorical frameworks, utilitarian goals, and strategic aims” (Brillenburger, van der Tuin, and Verhoeff 2023: 60).

Therefore, in “Rouse the Ruse and the Rush” I mobilize the creative form of linguistic inquiry, poetry, to critique the existing terms for how we describe a woman’s relationship to the body she finds herself in and the bodies (including what she might call “her own”) she creates from it. I also attempt to build a vocabulary for describing how bodies can be defined in relation to each other and their material conditions, which pushes away from drawing lines around property and personhood. I don’t expect this vocabulary to be programmatic for, or entirely applicable to, any other person’s inquiry into the ethics and pragmatics of reproductive justice—but I knew I needed to find a way, through the particular kind of world building and speculative thinking I do (again, poetry), to piece together the questions, ambivalences, grief, and gratitude that have been part of my own research on this subject and to make it a collective resource. Luckily, poetry is not policy. Poetry allows for undecidability, and perhaps that is precisely what gives poetry its political urgency. As Johnson (1986: 35) writes, “It is often said, in literary-theoretical circles, that to focus on undecidability is to be apolitical. Everything I have read about the abortion controversy in its present form in the United States leads me to suspect that, on the contrary, the undecidable is the political. There is politics precisely because there is undecidability.”

Throughout “Rouse the Ruse and the Rush,” I draw from various sources—“translating, deciphering, developing,” and creatively “misreading” them, to link to D. N. Rodowick’s (2023) essay in part 1 of this special section—to show that no new or personal vocabulary emerges purely new, or purely personal, as indicated earlier. These sources include H.D.’s *Notes on Thought and Vision* (1919)—written as she was rehabilitating from a miscarriage, the breakdown of her marriage, the death of her father, another pregnancy through another lover, and subsequent abandonment by the baby’s father (Gelpi 1982: 10–11)—W. H. Auden’s poem “Orpheus” (1940), and Anne Carson’s (1995) essay “The Gender of Sound.” I have also included references to Dutch dictionary entries, Korean exhibition texts regarding porcelain moon jars and placenta jars from the Joseon dynasty, loose transcriptions of bird and insect songs, and Adolf Loos’s ([1913] 2019) troubling treatise *Ornament and Crime*.

The central medium of my inquiry, however, is the work of Rachel Ruysch, an immensely successful painter of floral still lifes during the Dutch Golden Age. I attempt to employ the seventeenth-century still life as the anchor from which I interrogate the “history of self-ownership that goes back to the early days of capitalism and the rise of private property” (Lanphier 2021) and how women’s bodies have creatively fostered and resisted this history. Ruysch’s paintings are remarkable not only for their extravagantly detailed and varied bouquets but also for how she depicts the precarity of such beauty. Interspersed between stems in full bloom are those that have wilted or decayed, or those that have been half-eaten by parasitic insects always lurking nearby, sitting on the tabletop or hanging under a leaf. Further, while still life is the quintessential painterly genre expressing material affluence, worth noting is that the primitive accumulation of capital that endows it—most notably, colonialism—often lies just outside the frame. In a painting such as *Fruit and Insects* (1711), however, Ruysch incorporates ears of corn, thus rendering her work as “visual evidence of the expansion of European power in the Americas” that produced an “interchange not just of peoples and cultures but of flora and fauna as well” (Winograd 2018: 183).

I want to be clear, however, that “Rouse the Ruse and the Rush” attempts not to celebrate or valorize Ruysch’s work in such a context but, rather, to underscore the ambivalences—of exceptionally being a woman producing such creative work during this particular moment of Dutch cultural and economic prosperity—inscribed into it. My sense of ambivalence is recorded in the homophonic translation of Ruysch’s name into the words “rouse,” “ruse,” and “rush” in the title, which splits her artistic signature into multiple, arguably imprecise parts. “Ruysch” is also connected etymologically to the Dutch word *ruis*, meaning “noise.” In that sense, I like to imagine that such sonic wordplay more precisely approaches what the name has meant and can mean.

Further, Rachel was given her name by (or claimed her name from) her father, Frederik Ruysch, an anatomist and botanist known for his innovative embalming techniques. With Rachel’s help, Frederik created a series of dioramas incorporating human, often fetal, body parts and decorative elements such as lace ribbons, pearls, and coral that were collected as art (Berardi 1998: 174). Almost a thousand of them are still on display in St. Petersburg, where they went after being purchased in 1713 by Peter the Great. The basic art historical argument of “Rouse the Ruse and the Rush” is that Rachel weaves death and decay into her exuberant bouquets just as the ornaments of life were woven into

her father's display of embalmed parts, because only then are both life and death most vividly sensible. Frederik tried to animate death; Rachel stilled life. Rachel, I want to suggest, employed the inherent abstraction involved in representing life on a two-dimensional painted canvas to show, even more vividly, that the stakes of living can be known only if we can train our eyes to see the dying that made it possible.

But then, "What does the song hope for?," as Auden asks in the poem "Orpheus" (1940). Through poetry, I endeavor not to animate death but to animate abstraction. Poetry, particularly in the modern conceptualization of lyric poetry, is a form of creative labor simultaneously seen, heard, and recitable, and it can transform the sight of death into a performed rhythm. In his essay "Sounding Auden," through which I was introduced to "Orpheus," Seamus Heaney (1987) writes, "A new rhythm, after all, is a new life given to the world, a resuscitation not just of the ear but of the springs of being." Through ekphrasis, through mobilizing still life and still lives through the linguistic, sonic waves of lyric poetry, I want to access a history of reproductive labor that has too long been privatized and embalmed inside individual wombs. Above all, I hope to give shape to the collective noise that always has pervaded the choices about their bodies women have had to make and that now shares responsibility for how they have had to make it right.

## Rouse the Ruse and the Rush

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Rachel said to her father, Frederik,  
a silk ribbon along the navel and then  
around the half-formed skull could  
turn the figure into a *tulipa acuminata*,

with its spidery blooms quivering  
in the embalming fluid as if entranced  
by the distant song of starlings and

the promise that its translucent fingers  
still curled against the warmth of its mother.

\*

The blood has turned  
darker and thicker,  
brown smeared across  
white cloth, as if  
a palette knife was taken  
to this womb, and here  
are the scales of the  
raspberry shaped  
insect, ground  
into poppy seed  
oil and earth,  
and beneath that,  
dead-color,  
*doodverf,*  
of the ground that held  
you until the  
rustle and the  
rush insisted  
you could not  
stay.

\*

Last autumn the ground laid littered with starlings. They thought it was the toxins in yew berries, the contamination of natural waters, possibly the radio frequency radiation from the newly installed tower. There's always something a little shocking when one sees a clump of dirt or a cast-off sock and finds that it's really a tiny bird body. When they took a knife to split the black feathers apart and uncover the hidden killer, they found a broken heart, ruptured liver, and blood, blood where it shouldn't be, even in such a tiny body. And there, from red-wrecked lungs, emerged the green seeds of the story: a common song of madness as the earth became laden with starlings, hundreds of them hurling their bird bodies onto the ground and at each other. Who knows what hurt they heard in the air, who knows what ecstasy in that last gasp of rigor?

\*

The name *Ruysch* is likely  
linked to the word *ruis*,  
which in Dutch  
refers to “noise,”

“a disturbing sound that doesn’t stop,”

“a collective term for disruptions  
in human communications,”

“an arbitrary variation in a signal.”

It is what we see  
as a snowstorm  
on our television screens,

“a random dot pixel pattern of static,”

where snow and static  
become synonym,  
where seeing and hearing  
become homonym.

It can be defined as  
white, pink, violet,  
surface,  
internal, external,  
thermic.

It lies somewhere  
between a rustle  
and a rush,  
like the petals  
of a rose  
tangling into wind  
chimes just as  
a cloud  
arises.

What appears as a disturbance,  
disruption or  
random  
variation  
can become a mutation,  
can become characteristic,  
can become language,  
especially if it  
doesn't stop,  
if it  
forms  
a collective.

“An example of *ruis* in communication  
is when a speaker uses more modes of expression  
than strictly necessary.  
Another example is redundancy,  
a speaker repeating  
himself while speaking.”

Such circularity arouses,  
gives pleasure,  
reassures us  
of the variability  
of the invariable.

After all,

definition is a still life,  
a well-crafted ruse,  
so what can translation be,  
but noise that comes  
to rest into song?

Still

that song curls  
against the form  
of a question,

asking again  
and again when

there is a rest

what is a

rouse is a

ruse is a

rush is a

\*

At the bottom of the aquarium  
is a pearl and a grain of sand.

The pearl says, "Grain of sand,  
why must you always write in  
such long, unreadable sequences?"

The grain of sand replies, "O, Pearl,  
you always emerge to surprise  
and with such glory,

but for me, but for me,

I'm so scared

of ever leaving anything  
on its own."

\*

To translate means *to carry across*,

like the boat that carries us  
from one shore to another,

like the muscles that carry us  
from there to here, here to there.

All translations fail, just as they all succeed.  
You are where you wanted to go, but now  
where you want to go is somewhere else.

To be translated means *to be removed*  
*from one place to another*,

to be borne even without being born,  
to be a song given over either to flesh or air.

Any mother knows that *mourning*  
is the echo of *making, making*  
the echo of *mourning*.

Any oyster knows that discomfort  
is all that separates ground from gem.

Any poet knows that there's only  
so long any song can be carried,

like a swooping mass  
of starlings in the sky,

like an unpredictable rush  
of blood through the heart,

like an inflorescence of chrysanthemum  
drawn out by chill and shadows.

\*

I try to imagine what you would look like now.  
You would think it might be easy, having two others,  
but you were first, and by the time they would be  
your age, you already have gone somewhere else—

And it's no good to imagine what you would have  
looked like if just a little younger than you would be  
now, because you never were just a little younger,  
just as you will never be how old you would be now—

Where are you now? See, I know I'm talking in circles,  
I'm casting a wide net, I'm trying to hold you in the heat  
of my voice. Where else would you be? I want poetry,  
I want to make this beautiful, but beauty is a recourse—

It's a way of being fine with being futile. No, here is  
just prose and noise. When the gynecologist (or would  
he be an obstetrician now?) cut you out, he said,  
"Did you see that? It was like . . ." and made a sound—

And it's no good to write it out, to put it into letters,  
to make it something silly, so here is just what it meant:  
*it was so fast, it was mechanical, it was so clean,*  
*it was so easy, it was meant to be,* there you were—

And to that point I couldn't think of you as a person  
so it's not what he said that bothered me so much  
as that flinch I saw afterward, when he noticed that  
I was there too, a living person who could listen—

What could I see? I could only hear. *Every sound we  
make is a bit of autobiography. It has a totally private  
interior yet its trajectory is public. A piece of inside  
projected to the outside.* And that sound made—

you made you were felt you were named you were  
heard now you are there there always just there  
it was so easy so fast so clean it was meant to be  
you're always (now) gone somewhere (here) else

\*

*What does the song hope for?*

Under the insouciant chrysanthemums, a single dark path comprised of copious strokes, a shell cracked to a protrusion of pink, walnut, oyster, tulip, the cleaving of my love, take a step back, it's called a bud blast, an exuberant term for the dissolution of figure into ground

*What warmth for the song is enough?*

A dark path, a wavelength, a rotation, Iambe knows what is worth caring about and what is not, Iambe knows what is dear and what is not, Iambe can make the mourning mother laugh, she shrieks, she skips, she throws her skirt above her head, protrusion of pink, and there she hangs, in a serpentine dance

*What will the song do, after we are gone?*

We watch the trail of ants emerging from ground to foliage, I say to her, *do you know how such tiny bodies are able to tear these leaves apart*, oh, I know it, I saw it in the movie, they sing a silent song, *a high-frequency vibration*, that stiffens the material they need to cut, *but they don't eat the leaves*, no, they use it to build a nest for the fungus they'll feed to their babies, *unless the fungus eats them* from inside out, *there*, hang there, it whispers in their heads, so that my bud can flower

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She descends into the hypogaeum,  
     what they call the Gallery of Honor,  
 with her hands spread across  
     the roundness of her belly,  
 which in this case is a glass jar  
     filled with a clear solution  
 derived of clotted pig's blood,  
     Berlin blue and mercury oxide.

Rachel says to her fathers, entombed  
     in a circle now radiating from her,  
 "Which of your souls will find  
     new form in this mass of tissue  
 and tenderness, which of you will  
     incubate from death into dream?"

Inside the jar is the wrinkled pink  
     foot of a child, arched as if mid-  
 play, or as if it has just plunged  
     into a pool, with a layer of lace  
 ribboned around that part of the leg  
     just above the ankle, where  
 it was severed from the body.

Rachel says, pointing out the tiny dots  
     on the flesh that could not  
 have been rendered with paint or plaster,  
     "ἐπί (*epi*), 'on' or 'upon,' θηλή (*thēlē*),  
 'teat,' 'nipple,' for the mother's breast  
     from which such flesh is nourished."

As she walks around the chamber,  
     one hand cupping the glass vessel  
 in front of her, the other hand  
     stroking the limestone wall for where  
 the flint and obsidian had struck it,  
     she hears a humming in her own

red-wrecked lungs, and she feels  
 a vibration in the brainpan  
 of the whore tucked away, unrecognizable,  
 under the child's foot.

*Epithelium:*

“ἐπί (*epi*), ‘on’ or ‘upon;’ θηλή (*thēlē*),  
 ‘teat,’ ‘nipple.’” But it was so called,  
 not for the mother's breast,  
 but the translucent covering  
 of small nipples of tissue  
 on the lip through which  
 all songs must pass.

\*

The moon jars are better known and still made,  
 they bear the romance of two halves  
     joined in the middle,  
         time and scratch,  
                 the journey through craters and valleys,  
 all aglow under their glaze.

Aristophanes would tell us,  
 they were all round and moved round  
     *and round*, the expression of an ancient need.  
 They would hold flowers and wine  
     and the ash left over from their own making.

But in the National Museum I'm drawn  
 to the other white porcelain,  
     three jars of ascending size,  
         also from the seventeenth century.  
 Like Russian dolls each one

would have been entombed in another,  
     ribbon plaited around their handles  
         to form an intricate crown,  
 and then laid inside a sacred chamber.  
     If we'd take a knife to split lid from body,

at the center we'd find the dormant seed  
 of history: placenta and cord, a prayer for well-being,  
     a tablet that shows the patterns of wind and water.  
 If I'd take a knife to split this vessel in half,

I'd find at the center  
     a shrine instead of tomb,  
         pomegranates ripening within the sun-lit walls  
 of a mountain garden, a small hand that clasps mine  
     as we search for ants and mushrooms,

a transmission of dots and dashes, the necessity  
 of time for signal, still and after all, the life I chose as story.

\*

*Once a [ ] becomes conscious*  
*of this jellyfish*  
*above [ ] head,*  
*this pearl within [ ] skull,*  
*this seed cast into the ground,*  
*[ ] chief concern automatically*  
*becomes [ ] body.*

*Once a [ ] becomes conscious*  
*of this [ ]*  
*above [ ] head,*  
*this [ ] within [ ] skull,*  
*this [ ] cast into the ground,*  
*[ ] chief [ ] automatically*  
*becomes [ ] body.*

*Once a [ ] becomes conscious*  
*of this [ ]*  
*above [ ] [ ],*  
*this [ ] within [ ] [ ],*  
*this [ ] cast into the [ ],*  
*[ ] chief [ ] automatically*  
*becomes [ ] [ ].*

Once a [ ] becomes [ ]

[ ] *this* [ ]  
[ ] [ ] [ ] ,

*this* [ ] [ ] [ ] [ ] [ ] ,

*this* [ ] [ ] [ ] [ ] [ ] [ ] ,

[ ] [ ] [ ] *automatically*  
*becomes* [ ] [ ] .

Once [ ] woman [ ] [ ] [ ]

[ ] *this* [ ]  
[ ] [ ] *jellyfish*,

[ ] [ ] [ ] [ ] [ ] [ ] ,

[ ] [ ] [ ] [ ] [ ] [ ] [ ] ,

[ ] [ ] [ ] [ ] [ ]  
[ ] [ ] *body*.

[ ] [ ] [ ] [ ] [ ] [ ] [ ]

[ ] [ ] [ ] [ ]  
[ ] [ ] [ ] [ ] ,

[ ] *pearl* [ ] [ ] [ ] [ ] ,

[ ] grain [ ] [ ] [ ] *ground*,

[ ] [ ] [ ] [ ] [ ] [ ]  
[ ] *her* [ ] .

\*

The painter fell in love with things as well as people.  
 She would fall in love with the moss she scraped off  
 the bottom of the forest floor; the butterfly wings  
     she stamped against the monochromatic paint  
 in order to enliven it with texture; the glass jar  
     that once held a salamander and her firstborn's  
 placenta, into which she now weaves poppies,  
     cornflowers, honeysuckle, and thistles. What were  
 people but a composition of things, their lives just  
     prolonged moments of such things held together,  
 preparing themselves for the next stage of dispersal,  
     rearrangement? But this didn't mean she wasn't  
 sentimental. She loved her husband, her ten children,  
     the bee she scooped up between paper and cup  
 in order to release it through her window, the embalmed  
     fetus for which she plaited a crown of forget-me-nots  
 and wrapped a bouquet of cherry blossoms and pansies  
     with a silk ribbon to place in its small, curved hands.  
 She loved her long life, the two decades she outlived  
     Rembrandt, the four she outlived Vermeer. And why  
 not? If one insists on admiring the riotous red  
     veins of carnations, the fine lace edges gathered  
 blue as cornflower, the iridescent open parenthesis  
     of the dragonfly, one must love the moss, thistle,  
 shifting shadows in the background offering to hold  
     it all together. The painter even loved what the poet  
 wrote, *every man and woman is free to accept or deny life—  
     to accept or reject this questionable gift—this thistle,*  
 these shadows, this vein, this rustle, this ruse, this rush.

\*

I'm alive nearly  
as many years as Vermeer  
and as a woman  
that means  
I'm even older

and I've never known  
a scenario in which  
the opposition  
is truly between

*choice and life*

who would choose  
what we have to live  
who would live  
what we have to choose

in Dutch the word *vagina*  
rhymes with page, *pagina*

in English the word *womb*  
rhymes with the word *tomb*  
or both, read slant, with *room*

in Korean the word  
for a surrogate mother  
or womb is *seed-catcher*

sometimes those seeds

are caught

and then cast

into the ground

to become a grain,  
a jellyfish, a rose

who chose what we had to live  
who lived what we had to choose

and isn't there a *life* then

just as long as there is a *choice*

just as wide as a gray-blue room

with a pale gray woman  
in blue,  
fingers curled  
against the page

in front of her

\*

It's not that the little tokens of life—a pearl, a button, red cloth, nail polish, an offering hand—become ornaments for death, but rather that death and life are simply variations on the same arrangement. Here is a tulip smashing into a peony, an iris and two carnations swept out of the way. Here is an oyster shell resting next to the vase, its muted luster akin to petals wilting or fallen into compositional shadows. Here is red and pink and orange but behind it, even beneath it, is *grey, grey, grey*. Which part was the part of living, which was the part of dying? An architect in Vienna, whose name you understand as *empty* or *false*, once wrote, “Weep not, for this is what constitutes the greatness of our age. We have overcome ornament, we have fought our way through to ornamentlessness. Behold, the time is at hand.” Time is at hand, like a velvet pouch that opens to show the valves of a heart, with a thumb and forefinger maneuvered and injected with wax and resin to clutch at the corners. Isn't ornament, still and after all, a comfort? And as it is, I can place an empty shell on the table, I can fill this grey background with the delicate grey shadows of drooping leaves and insect wings, I can turn red blood into clear water, I can make myself hear the static behind the song, and I can say you are *there*,

*there,*

*here.*

\*

Rachel said to her father, Frederik,  
what no one tells you about a child  
is that once they are here you will  
spend every remaining moment of your  
roused life shielding them from death,

but if you are successful, if all goes as  
it should, then by the time they make  
that one last gasp, by the time they  
fall to the ground, old and acclimated  
to the circular, common air around  
them, their frame as frail as the remains  
of a tiny bird body, you won't be there

to hold them warm and to sing  
into their lips they need not be afraid.

## Notes

1. Sections of this long sequence have been published in *nY* 48 (2022, translated into Dutch by Edan Azulay), in *DaisyWorld Magazine* 4 (2022), and as a limited-edition chapbook, in collaboration with the artist Fi Jae Lee, from Nion Editions (2023). The entirety of “Rouse the Ruse and the Rush” is published here.
2. *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization*, no. 19-1392, 2022 WL 2276808, June 24, 2022 (majority opinion), [https://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/21pdf/19-1392\\_6j37.pdf](https://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/21pdf/19-1392_6j37.pdf).

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