

AMY SONOUN

Wreaths

—after George Herbert

1

Today my daughter testified *de raptu meo*,
“Concerning my rape,” bore witness to the truth,
The truth of that to which she testified,

From Latin *testis*, root of “testicles”—
In the vernacular, “*cojones*,” “nads,”
“Balls,” “boys,” and “stones”—and though she swore by none,

No man or boy has call to lend her one.
Her one great role—played by so many stars!
So many stars, most cast for just one night,

For one-night stands, no second or third trial,
Trying, under pressure, to say what’s right.
The right to silence generally conferred on us

Conferred, on her, an onus to speak up,
Speak up and stanch those tears behind her words
Her words could stanch. It’s all obscenely trite,

To write a scene—cribbed from a screen—that writes
Itself, itself repeats and magnifies the harm,
The harm, not hurt, it took some balls to do.

2

Cecilia Champaigne played her role. No balls,
But balls enough to testify that Chaucer,
Chaucer the couplet man, did take by force,

Did take by force what she alone might give,
Might give and never have again. Released—
By her released—he sent Cecilia ten pounds.

Ten pounds Cecilia gained for having “stones.”
Chaucer’s stones lie now in Poets’ Corner.
In Poets’ Corner canons dust his stone,

His stone and those of lesser English poets,
Poets whose voices dropped a pitch at twelve,
And who, by twelve, knew honesty by tone,

By tone of voice—the men who hear it, know it.
I know what silence in a church won’t say,
Won’t say which of these poets, pens at rest,

Penises dust, rests easily in such a place,
Placed as they are so close to Geoffrey Chaucer,
Chaucer the couplet man, stone silent, now as then.

3

Athens cross-examined Maycomb's Ewells,
You'll recall, in *To Kill a Mockingbird*,
A mocking, superior Atticus Finch

Inched Mayella Ewell away from perjury,
The jury itching to deliberate,
Deliberately to affirm Mayella's lies,

Lies she learned at the left hand of her father,
Farther and farther, bent by blows, from truth.
One "truth" witnessed on screen by many boys—

Many too many boys?—Mayella lied,
Lied like a girl, lied *de raptu sua*,
Concerning a "rape" that wasn't one at all,

But a confederacy—Maycomb's fathers'
Fathers' fathers bringing rope for that "boy" Tom,
Tom "robin's son," no mockingbird safe from Finches.

From Finches too many boys learned girls lie,
Lie ballsy with their right hands on the Bible,
Biblically lie about boys they know they want,

Want to lie *with*, not *to*: lie is what girls do.
Girls do not have what it takes to testify—
From Latin *testis—de raptu sua*.

4

How many met like Cecilia and Chaucer?
Chaucer in arras, whispering “boo,” pen stiff,
Stiffened most urgently, though he was married,

Married fourteen years, and not to Cecilia,
Not to Cecilia but to a well-born maid
Called Phillipa, like her queen, a lady’s maid

Made in a bed—her father a courtier,
And a courtier’s son—a vessel, a lady
Made—doubtless—in release, release most blessed,

Blessed by the church, and with his wife ordained,
Ordained the one vessel of his seed. How many?
How many met like Cecilia and Chaucer?

Met Chaucer, and made him ache—so he did find—
And finding make, make in his chamber, make
To understand him, at a feast, in half-light

Half-cast and half-withheld by torches,
Torches, sconces, tapestries, or in some crook,
Crooked while his one vessel Phillipa danced her part,

Her part in a new reel, and rushed to enter,
To enter as he entered, in a rush, to reel,
And reeled, too, in a bawdy house, as some say

Cecilia’s stepmother did run, as her family name,
Chaumpaigne, French for “open country,” or “field”—
That field, as it were—seems made for meaning.

5

Today my daughter took Cecilia's part,
Mayella's part. For Chaucer stood a boy,
A boy my daughter "knows," but barely—

He barely knows her, though they've met, this boy,
The boy who got her stoned, the boy whose stones
Ached—she passed out—ached until they didn't.

I haven't said yet how he met my daughter,
My daughter, whom he knows biblically: she drank
Three shots, pre-party, then he put a bong

Bang against her mouth. Maybe they kissed, lips
Bang against lips. Maybe he put his hands,
His hands, on her ass, in his room. Maybe,

Maybe his balls ached, like Chaucer's balls, until—
Until they didn't. She'd passed out. When she woke,
She woke in open country, no underwear,

Nowhere near his room. She didn't know until—
Until she did. She does not know him sober.
Sober is Athens, not Maycomb. Sober can

Consent. Sober knows "no" and "no" is no
Double negative. Soberly she testified,
From Latin *testis*, meaning "stones," and "boys."

6

My mother held her tongue and held a glass,
A glassy silence seventy years long,
So long that even I learned to see through it,

See through the nothing that her mother made,
Made and kept for her, until she'd make her own,
Her own to care for—silence, a man, and children.

(Six children, it turned out, four of whom had balls.)
The balls it took to break so long a silence!
The silence brokered, weekly, by her mother,

Her mother, weakly, strengthening in mine
What I reject in me. Of course her mother knew,
Knew for years her husband raped her daughter,

Her daughter tasting beer and anthracite,
Anthracite, tobacco, and acid reflux,
Acid reflux, like emotion mooted,

Muted, his slow bent motion muting her
Mute bedsprings, release coming to nothing,
Nothing for seventy years, nothing I saw through.

7

When my older brother raped my older sister,
My older sister says, I had just come out,
Come out—peekaboo!—like the film based on

To Kill a Mockingbird, starring Gregory Peck,
Star of *Roman Holiday*, my mother's leading
Leading man, who would not touch a lady,

The lady she wanted to believe she was,
And *was*, unless she wanted him. O Attic shape!
O Atticus, O Tom, unable to keep silent,

Silent as glass, as vodka with rocks, not stones,
Not testifying, from Latin *testis*.
My sister did not not not want to say it,

To say it is not Boo—is never Boo,
(Whose name means “be afraid”)—it is not Boo
We ought to fear, but fathers, brothers, mothers.

8

*A wreathèd garland of deservèd praise,
Of praise deservèd, unto thee I'd give,
I'd give to thee, who knowest all men's ways,*

*Men's crooked, winding ways, wherein we live,
Wherein we die, not live: for life is straight,
Straight as a line, and ever tends to thee,*

My daughter, who did testify today
De raptu meo, and who does not write lines,
Nor poems, which sound so round but wind,

Wind down the page, as Herbert's "Wreath" has done,
Must do, in black and white, for poems' resemblances
Dissemble. Life is not straight. It writes,

It writes us down, twists facts, makes images.
Imagines, for example, a girl waking,
Waking up sober in life's open country,

Glassy eyes open and no clear memory,
Memory cleared by alcohol and life.
Life left grass in her hair. Life's strong left hand

Bruises the page, as any poem must do,
Must do, to do a poem's work—hurt and not harm;
Hit hard and drive the reader to her corner.

To corner a mockingbird's no sin, you know.
You testified, my daughter, *de raptu meo*,
"Concerning my rape." I have bent these wreaths

*For thee, who art more far above deceit,
Than deceit seems above simplicity,
Forgive not poetry, but poems' complicities,*

*So I may live, and like, and know thy ways.
Know them and practise them: then I might give
For these poor wreaths, give thee a crown of praise.*