

"Aylett is a poet who thinks with the precision of the scientist and writes with the grace of the artist. This collection, masquerading under an ironic title, explores gender and gendering. Though not without humour, many of these honest, moving, often provocative poems have a darker edge – touching on the difficulties of motherhood, acceptance, mental health, silencing of women, even rape and domestic murder. Aylett demonstrates an accomplished use of form, managing to bring a sonnet – about women as sex objects in advertising (*Venus*) – to a pertinent, perfectly rhymed ending in a four letter word!

Another strand involves a re-making of myths, re-drawing them for our times. Her re-working of a Li Po poem is masterly: she sets it at the time of the Iraq War, the young woman missing her squaddie: Li Po's 'howling gibbons called out into the heavens' transform into 'the estate echoed to stolen cars at night.'"

- Christine DeLuca

"*Pretty in Pink* is a collection of poems about women and their worlds, their triumphs and frustrations, their struggles and endurance. The range is wide, incorporating Rosa Luxemburg, dead bodies in sheds, Wythenshaw bubble-perms, hospitals and anti-Trump demonstrations. These pleasingly political poems are intelligent and alert, formally adroit and lexically inventive. Ruth Aylett sees the world clearly: she has no time for sentimentality or false consolations; her vision is lit by solidarity and compassion, a wounded optimism, ferocity and pride."

- Steve Ely, Director, The Ted Hughes Network

"Ruth Aylett's vividly-inhabited poems are full of the female experience, wit, anger - and the stuff of life itself."

- Fiona Sampson



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PRETTY IN PINK

Pretty in Pink

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*To my mother, Pamela Aylett (1921-2012), who with stubborn
resolution, went from pharmacy assistant in Boots to NHS consultant.
Much missed.*

Pretty in Pink

Ruth Aylett



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Preface

These poems are about women: fragments of our varied experiences. The thread running through them is inspired by a founder of modern feminism, Simone de Beauvoir, who said in *The Second Sex*: ‘On ne naît pas femme, on le devient’ – one is not born woman, but becomes one.

She was a favourite author of my mother, an ardent Francophile and feminist, who battled gender stereotypes all her life. She was once one of a handful of women at a posh British Medical Association dinner, held in a London club. At the end of the meal all the other women rose, to be escorted into the drawing room. She sat tight. ‘Tales my mother told me’ is a tribute to her determination to become a woman in her own way.

That’s not always an easy thing to do. Poverty and violence press on women with greater force, as we see in conflicts and the 2020 pandemic. Childbirth and childcare are unevenly divided, under- or not resourced, the world of work still has women at the bottom. Misogynistic violence has certainly not gone away and social media magnifies the terrifying voices of male anger and attack. Gender stereotypes bear down especially hard on young women, harder than when I was one. And don’t get me going on ‘pinkification’...

However, patriarchy is a system, not a person, inimical to many men too, and in solidarity it can and has been pushed back. There’s anger and sorrow in my poems, but hope as well.

Eve's dazzle job

She started with her face:
a zig-zag down the middle
formed a colourful left-pointing nose,
the eye above darkened into shadow
adding a sideways profile
to frontwards glance.
Shaved off her dark hair,
janused the back of her head
with eye-like circles, so no god,
real or supposed, could expect
to take her by surprise.

Throwing away the clothes so
recently adopted,
she black-and-yellow striped
her body like a tiger or wasp,
things that bite and sting.
She greened her arms into willow
shimmering in a wind, hands
emerging scarlet with white
fingers brown-pointed as claws.
The serpent, seeing this,
crawled quickly back into its hole.

She transformed her legs
into great curved bow waves,
blue with white flecks,
to surf into a future
of taking charge, small children
with sticky fruit in their hands
paddling in her wake.

Primes of life

Three:

Loves ribbons in her hair
and a red angora bolero
with transparent buttons.

Seven:

Almost finds Jesus
until, asked to look deep
within, finds only herself.

Eleven:

Growing small breasts,
dispirited by bras and
the end of going topless.

Thirteen:

Best friend explains
periods are disgusting,
and all that body hair, gross.

Seventeen:

Copies a man's stride
at night, wears trainers and hoodie,
walks on the side of oncoming traffic.

Nineteen:

Finds boyfriends
really do want arm-pits shaved,
and legs; hears the term *Brazilian*.

Twenty-three:

Feet up in stirrups
perineum stretched around that head,
decides body hair might not count.

Twenty-nine:

A small daughter, desperate
for a pink princess costume
and a dolls' make-up kit.

Venus

Though radiating confidence she's cross
at lying on the bonnet of a Merc
in naked splendour; feels her godhead's loss
when selling stuff like this is woman's work.

Nostalgic for the manufactured myth
where sex becomes once more a sacrament,
all worldly pain is conquered by its bliss,
and love's allure makes pleasure innocent.

She dresses, shrugs, decides it's over-sold:
as if that strange explosion in the brain
subsumes all other joys a life could hold;
but knows tomorrow she'll be back again.

Goddess of beauty, carnal love and luck
co-opted to promote the mindless fuck.

Pink

In May, the flowering cherries,
with resolute extravagance,
pile layer upon layer
of pink double-petalled blossoms
along leafless branches,
filling the sky
with tutus and princesses.

Under the slow pink snowfall
mothers wheel pink pushchairs
carrying small girls in pink furry hats,
with pink rabbits clutched in pink gloves,
who later will ride pink bikes
and sleep under pink quilts,
in rooms from which
green, yellow, purple, red
and above all blue,
are expunged and deleted.

Their faces may glow pinkly
but they will never sweat,
always giggle helplessly
and wave long pink nails
at any difficult or challenging task.
This pink nirvana
with its rosy Disney turrets
requires no intellect.

And if they notice the
pink fluffy handcuffs,
complain about the pink
vacuum cleaner or the pink
extra high heels that hurt the feet,

designed to make escape impossible,
they will be told not
to bother their tiny pink heads,
since all is for the best
in this pinkest of all possible worlds.

Here the blossom always drifts downwards;
an elegant confetti fall
in which Barbie marries her Ken
and the pinkness is all.

The choice of Achilles

The Achaeans never understood Achilles
was a trouser role for Deidamia.

Yes, I moved fast and thought faster
always good for winning fights
but my heart was never in it.
Sent to Skyros by my mother
to hide as Deidamia's sister
I realised what that emptiness
had needed. I was a woman,
not the weapon they expected,
the one the oracle had promised.

It was Dionysios' pleasure
to match us together,
she, who knew herself a man,
I, who knew myself a woman.
Gods have their little schemes.

That cleverness of Odysseus,
mixing weapons in with dresses
and jewellery, sounding trumpets.
I hid under a couch, she seized
the spear she had coveted.

You know how it ended. She fell
for Patroclus so hard; him dead,
Achilles weighed his own life light.
Under all that armour they could not
tell the gender of his heart.
Those who knew, kept very quiet.

Chemistry

The only thing she knew about love
was that chemistry was important.

Sex with her first flamed into a
white magnesium glare:
they kept the curtains closed
until it burnt out leaving grey powder.

With her second the flames were
smaller but an attractive apple green
and his verdigris eyes were
attractive too, but they weathered into
a passionless calm.

And then the third: explosive like
potassium at the first tears,
leaving charred wreckage.

Her last firmly gathered up
the chemistry set, threw it away,
suggested she progress to biology,
and asked her to remove her metaphors.

Ch'ang-kan comes to Manchester

After Ch'ang kan Village Song, by Li Po

My bubble perm was still new then
I sat on our front step messaging my mates

You pulled up on your new mountain bike
in unscratched silver, did casual wheelies

We both lived here in Wythenshawe
both restless, wanting something different

Only fourteen; you said you were The One
but I was sure a better bloke would come along

Mouthed off at you, texted my mates sneers
ignored your smiles, pushed off embraces

But the very next year my heart crumbled
and suddenly I couldn't live without you

You told me you were Mr Dependable
no dropping me suddenly if I got pregnant

Then a summer later you went to be a squaddie
allocated to the second Iraq tour of duty

The summer smog turned the sky blank
and the estate echoed to stolen cars at night

We stood for more than an hour on the front step
and I drew a black marker line round your feet

Dust scours it away as I brush the step clean
and late August is already autumn, leaves fall

into September. Two red admirals jostle
on the waste ground willow herb, stick together

and it hurts. When I look in the mirror
I see some worn-out heart-sick stranger

Before you come back from Baghdad
or wherever, send a text or an email

But don't think I'm coming down south to meet you
No further than the train station at Piccadilly.

Finis terre

*Heavy, he says, picking it up.
Yes, she says, a geode,
not meeting his eyes.
Thrown out of a volcano
some millions of years ago;
I dug it out of the ground.*

*All that fire, he says,
you'd never guess, so brown
and pitted. Inside, she says
keeping her voice cool,
there's boiled quartz
and a glitter of sharp crystals.*

*How do you know? he asks
with a lazy curiosity,
have you x-ray vision?
Experience, she says,
I've seen them split open.*

*And will you break this one
he asks? No, she replies,
better to keep it whole.
I'll take it with me when
I leave here next week.
To remind me of home.*

Moments of birth

1. *Male, 12.45pm*

Hospital as cruise liner:

towering wall of lighted windows

isolated by November dark.

A fifteen hour voyage - she turns up early
as newbie mothers often do.

Pain at storm-force;

between the crashing wave crests,

troughs of tedium.

When push comes to shove

the tiring body fails to do its stuff,

and out he's dragged with forceps

to her yell; *that fucking hurts*.

2. *Female, 3.40 am*

Hospital as emergency:

Disinclined to turn up early,

finds the process suddenly

in painful run-away. That stubborn

lump of never-ending constipation

is a head; unable to sit up, hauled

horizontal to the ambulance.

Lights flash, wah wah siren,

almost achieves a ring-road birth.

Twenty minutes on the ward

and out the baby squirts, slippery as soap,

dripping, navy blue;

in one breath on her belly, pink.

3. *Male 4.30am, Female 4.36am*

Hospital as prison:

large as the great white whale,

with two in there, coerced to go

before the action starts.

Floats in a late-night bath; they float
inside her. Muscles so relaxed
her bed is soon a bath where amniotic
fluids flow. They're small it seems
since hardly has the pushing started
when the first is out and one more go,
the next. Lying still, her body washed
with sponges, knows she's had enough.

Chosen one – sestina for the lost child

Green sweet May that first time
in this old house, years back,
watching the chestnut leaves
rippling fingers, turning away
with a memory - *you look pale* -
from red candles for a not-child.

The red rash from an older child,
school infections all the time;
afterwards the heart goes pale
because there is no way back,
forwards is also running away
to an old house, chestnut leaves.

In darkness a red life leaves
the body, a not-yet-child,
whose future is pushed away,
dissolved in that fecund May-time,
leaving infection, an aching back,
an old house in which the air is pale.

That May dawn grey, empty, pale
until the sun touches the leaves
bringing the vivid green back
and the memory of a dying child,
half-formed heart vibrating, time
draining its warmth away.

Still the body finds a way
to unfinger grief, one pale
digit loosened at a time.
In the flare of autumn leaves
and bonfires, another child
carries a new future on its back.

May is green and sweet, coming back
to this old house, brushing away
shadow fingers with a living child
chosen in that night and pale
dawn. Chestnut candles and leaves
memorial to a bone-deep time.

At the back of the bitter pale
wind a faraway voice never leaves
off calling the unnamed child into time.

First-born

I liked the hospital clockwork. Meals at set times,
a trolley with stewed tea, Horlicks last thing.
Pain killers if you asked, a bell to press.

Now at night, the waking is endless,
the dozing and waking, the crying and crying,
sore nipples under hard gums, the rush of milk.

And cleaning bum; some startling colours.
First black tar stuff called mecony-something,
then yellow purée, and so much piss.

My time's no longer mine, but his,
I went in bulging but unattached
came out a mother, an appendage.

But then his silkiness against my face,
his warm milk scent, heart tappity-fast,
enormous burps, and then he'll smile at last.

Moving matters

That child just arrived in primary four,
is the broken pencil that doesn't write
the only lower-case letter in the alphabet,
she's untidy, full of long words, too sure;

does the tablecloth trick and breaks the china,
reads a book under the table,
has no small-talk or back-chat or smile,
hair cut short, minus ribbon or hair-slide.

Moved from a different jigsaw
where an odd but accepted feature
cannot slot into this new picture.

Only the boys do not nudge or snigger,
say she is strange, but if she can run,
chuck a ball and shove, it doesn't matter.

Titration

A drop at a time from the burette,
known into unknown;
waiting for the giveaway colour change,
titration on a quiet afternoon.

She wanted to be a boy.
Drip drip drip
Pink pink pink.
Princesses, ribbons; smile.
Pretty dresses, don't get dirty,
tidiness, helpfulness,
the good wife always...

She looked a mess, climbed trees,
wrestled with her younger brother,
went topless on sunny days
in the woods, wore jeans.

Because they were fourteen.
Because they were a gang.
Because women gag for it.
Because it was easy.

She had never learned how to scream.
Dragged under a young oak
a good one to climb,
branches touching the ground,
making a green tent;
enough of them to hold her down.

A drop at a time from the burette,
known into unknown.
The whole world in a colour change,
titration on a quiet afternoon.

Billy-no-mates

Football on the radio, as she
makes Saturday afternoon
Chelsea buns. The friends
she doesn't have will meet in town,
giggle about boys, go shopping,
try out the lipstick testers.

But here a warm yeast smell,
and the first rising of dough,
pale as their growing breasts,
a bubbling sponge in irresistible
expansion, cool and sticky
in her hands when its time to knead.

Then syrup to boil up, currants
to coat the smoothed snakes,
silky from her muscled pressure,
coiled and spiced, and left to prove.
Proof she hopes that buns
and winning goals can make a life.

In the greenwood

She took the fire-lighting test:
use one match, cook sausages.

And failed altogether. Plodded
hungrily under the trees hoping
the expected fun would materialise.

Was this a quest, an adventure?
Escape from the endless regulation
of the cultivated fields?

Or likely to end with a shallow grave
covered in leaves, attended by
singing birds and the young deer?

Somehow years passed. She found
berries were sustaining if monotonous,
learned to endure drizzle and winds.

Encountered other wandering types,
mostly fugitive misfits, the occasional
genius. Desultory chat. None stayed long.

Her choices were determined by where
the brambles were too thick, whether
over-hanging branches could be snapped off.

She got used to forest gloom, short views,
how trunks threw complicated shadows,
nights of impenetrable darkness.

Then one day, the trees thinned, stopped.
She emerged from the forest edge, blinking.
Stood amazed, by distances, landscape.

Molly

Nobody told you to be a princess:
your love of glitter, multi-coloured unicorns,
costumes with wings and wands,
and your mother's high-heeled shoes
is all your own, or so you will always believe.

And how you want what you want:
family nintendo, second helpings,
roles in your older brother's games;
as seven year olds do, with passion,
with argument, with wasp-like persistence.

Until the next thing. We mock-eat
your play-doh burger stacks
admire your all-colour drawings
and word-tumbling explanations,

crossing our fingers and toes that
your confidence and certainties
will never be squashed by any futures,
especially the ones we fear most.

Saturday shopping

It's nine sharp and she walks ten yards back
in case a friend sees her shopping with her Mum,
who knows this won't be a happy outing,
buying a new uniform for a new term.

It's eleven sharp and she walks ten yards back
carrying a bag from their two hours' labour;
a very short black skirt, a see-through white top,
absolutely certain to cause lots of trouble.

All she ever wants is to be popular.

All she ever wants is her daughter to smile.

All she hates is in the clothes in the bag.

All she hates is the knowledge that she's failed.

Selfie

These photographs make
hostile witnesses, you say,
a testimony proving
your essential ugliness.

Photographs cannot lie
about the moment,
but the moment can lie
about its before, its after.

Freezing the face
in the moment,
lies about its movement,
its leaving and arriving;

the play of thought
and feeling across
that surface proving
your river beauty.

Demonology

The witch with iron teeth
wrote your name across the sky
and the dark circling birds
mapped your location.

When I played your song
backwards it growled *necessity*
and the sixth word of the
sixth line on the sixth page
of your book was apophenia.

You say nothing, only point
at the richly coloured
stained glass faces observing you
then in a whisper accuse me
of lying as mothers do
when I say you are a good person.

Purification

They instruct you to pass through fire
until slag floats off the virginal molten gold;
put on a blue mantle, glow with
beatific patience. Abandon sex.

Insufficient. You must endure
the bone-cold pressure of years;
steps down and down again
first concrete, sharp,
then rough and wet
through chilly rock into
a carved out vacancy.

Pale robes cling then
spread in the clear water
that grips and purples flesh,
monthly blood seeps out,
an underwater spiral,
dirt floats off the soul's edges,
pain cracks and flakes from memory.

This done, you become pure.
Hoarded as an ingot of virtue
an intimidation, conspicuous
display. Shadow projected
as the electric fence that
makes guards unnecessary.

Anti-Trump demonstration

Edinburgh's art gallery square displays
a new composition: its Ionic pillars
a backdrop we foreground
with Rembrandt shadows;
so many pale faces street-lit under
woolly hats with jaunty pussy ears
a crowd of cubist angles packed together.

We are street art, angry art,
art that shouts on a wet evening.
Look down from this plinth
at young women with clear eyes
soft skin, unconscious
elegance and home-made
home-lettered cardboard signs.

*We will overcomb; Iron Bru
the only orange we'll allow.
Say it loud say it clear
ref-u-gees wel-come here,
in four thousand voices
magicked in twenty-four hours
of Twitter and resolution.*

Your doubting inner voice
says tiredly: two million
marched against war in Iraq;
they are new, don't know defeat,
the years-long slog of rocks pushed uphill.
What they do know is the fury of hope;
it crackles in the damp night
as their electrical shock hits *how it is*,
burns off dirt and assumptions,
reveals the shine of how it can be.

True Story

*I have a body in a bag, she said,
a skeleton from when I was a nurse.
It's wrapped in plastic sheeting in the shed.*
Her friend just laughed but things became much worse:

a cancer got her and they found the thing,
cut into it, released a dreadful smell,
revealed a hand all mummified, with ring;
an arm, pyjamas, then a face as well.

Eighteen years ago, she said her husband left.
He'd had affairs, was violent, never cared.
They'd noticed she had hardly seemed bereft,
but had she really killed him? Really dared?

Then found the fracture marks across his head
exactly matched the stone frog by her bed.

Self-portrait as a matchstick construction

Uncertain I was still here,
I needed to build a self portrait
from something my fingers could feel.

Aldi had multi packs of match-boxes.
Thoughts of involuntary combustion
forced me to strike each match
before use, leaving a sulphurous stink.

Their straightness was good
for the logic in my bones
but hard to curve into intuition;
the whole thing bigger than life-size,
though surely life out-scales any portrait?

I have to admit that once finished, it didn't
look much like the working photograph,
that didn't look much like me,
at least from the inside.
More African mask perhaps,
something to scare evil spirits
out of the visible world. Back to
where they nest, in my head.

Tales my mother told me

Rattling your jar of stories so long
some have fragmented
into a gravel of chipped names,
mythical places and times.
Others keep their heft and weight
in the palm of each telling.

They sit on my mantelpiece
with my fossil from Knocknarae,
marble pebble from Corfu.
Your greengrocer aunt offering
magnanimous choice of *any fruit*
in the shop until you picked
a plum and had to put it back;
hungry-30s classmates asking
for your orange peel, apple core.

This one your foundation truth:
hated housework and cleaning,
tried to be a librarian in Boots Lending,
accidental apprentice pharmacist,
night classes, then medical school.
Your half-brick through the window
of what was expected
from a railwayman's daughter
clatters in my story-jar too.

Menopause

She used to gulp the seasons down
like medicine: autumn mixtures of
melancholy and first-frost resolution;
winter brain-clearing and muscle-pumping;
an inevitable spring of bursting verbal invention
and summer-extravagant inebriations.

But has now arrived at a Californian
equilibrium of tepid sunshine goodwill,
no more rainstorms and gales or lunar blood.
Memory still undulates beneath her skin but only
in dreams does her belly twist and roll
with the elbows and knees of a new birth.

If the tectonic plates should suddenly slide,
shake the static landscape into rubble,
would she reboot into spring once more?
The pain of the head crowning and a shriek
of accomplishment overwriting the quiet decay
of forms and structures into entropic dust.

When Rosa met Marilyn

Dark and dank along the canal
and the lights that reflect
on its tired black flow
catch the faces of the women
who walk slowly, talking.
One with a limp fiercely
ignored, the other a shimmy
as natural as breathing.

‘I became Junius ¹:
they already wanted to kill me.’
‘I became Marilyn:
they already wanted to own me.’
‘I compelled with my ideas
made men take them seriously.’
‘A light for impetuous moths,
men only wanted to fuck me.

Did your men chase their dream
of you and never find it?’
‘My only man chased others
but fought beside me without limit.
Did you imagine a world made
new by people acting together?’
‘I created imaginary worlds
staying in their minds forever.

But the real world closed in
and my chemical support

*¹. Rosa Luxembourg was the author of illegal anti-WWI pamphlets,
written under the name Junius*

confused me until I
overdosed into the dark.’
‘A gun butt smashed my head,
they shot and then drowned me.

Still the revolution rises
rattling: I was, I am, I will be.’

Ventriloquist

In life your anger never burned in words,
you turned away and whispered as you went
to clean or cook; that sibilance I heard
as if from some small dying creature sent.

You spoke in polished ornaments and flowers
arranged in vases, pastry made for pies,
in floors scrubbed clean and whites you boiled for hours.
One morning woke; and knew that these were lies.

In search of truth wherever it might be,
you followed all those unsaid words you'd thrown
down to the beach, and straight into the sea,
your apron on, its pockets full of stone.

Looking for you, feet sinking in the sands,
I see white death with fish held in her hands.

Iseult's complaint

You won't need that surge of violins
where we are going, if you can follow me,
musician, into the nuked badlands.

Tristan died old, his looks lost years ago,
there was no room in the cardboard coffin
for the crematorium to immolate me.

I left a rose on top as the curtains closed,
and turned away. Only wild and beautiful lovers
make headlines, so go on, perform your myth again.

Love and death, death and love. What's the music
for habit and comfort, shopping together,
arms round shoulders, the times I cut his hair?

No place like home

First she built tiny houses
using garden stones - dark and damp
even for woodlice and centipedes;
all dismantled by her parents.

Next looked for dens on the heath:
the twiggy centre of rhododendrons,
space inside a young oak's
drooping branches; longed for a waterfall
with a cave behind metallic liquid.
But all these terrified after dark.

So designed mansions on graph paper,
floor plans with many rooms;
worried about access to natural light,
thinking of Roman villas, like at school.
Watched a new office block go up, understood
this was more than one person could construct.

Realised family was a kind of building:
married, had children; lived in it
for many years, sometimes happily.
Then the children grew up,
left home, the husband died.
Now, she stands on her own
with no roof to hide
the racing clouds, blown
by everlasting winds.

About the Author

Ruth Aylett has taught and researched computing and AI for many years, most recently in Edinburgh, and has been known to appear at poetry readings with a robot. Her poems are widely published, both in magazines such as *The North*, *Butcher's Dog*, *Prole* and *Agenda*, and in anthologies, most recently *Scotia Extremis* (Luath) and *Mancunian Ways* (Fly on the Wall). She was joint author with Beth McDonough of the 2016 pamphlet *Handfast* (Mother's Milk) and this is her first single-author pamphlet. She writes about women and their lives, science and technology, about what's wrong with the world and how it could be changed.

Ruth won the *Hungry Hill Poets and Politics* competition in 2017, came second (with Beth) in the *Cheltenham Poetry festival* and was commended in the competitions - *Buzzwords2014*; *Sonnet or Not 2017*; McLellan prize 2019.

She was shortlisted for the *Paper Moon* pamphlet competition in 2018 and long-listed in the 2017 *Ink Sweat & Tears/Café Writers Pamphlet Commission Competition* and the 2019 *Live Canon* pamphlet competition.

For more see <http://www.macs.hw.ac.uk/~ruth/writing.html>

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