

I. *To drip, drizzle*

I read Anne Carson's collection *Men in the Off Hours* in 2012 on a road trip down the West Coast, in between visits to grey swept beaches and moss covered woods. I've forgotten a lot of the specifics now as I do with most books I read (through the porousness of my memory only the feeling remains) but one thing caught hold, and it's something I've thought about ever since. It's about women and wetness.

Carson is a poet as well as a Classics scholar, and in an essay titled "Dirt and Desire" she examines a pervasive idea in ancient Greek society and myth that women are pollutants and transgressors, a being without boundaries and a notorious violator of the boundaries of others. In Greek mythology, as Carson notes, women morph, most often into monsters (Medusa, Hydra); they've no respect for the out-of-bounds (Pandora); they violate masculinity with vapors (Deianira) and garments (Klytemnestra), enveloping men in "a fatal formlessness." In ancient Greek philosophy and science, a "dry mind" was thought to be stable, lucid, male. Wetness was wanton, slippery, deceitful, dissolute.

Women were wet, and in their mutability, difficult to contain. A household that failed to control its women was said to be sailing a Melian boat, *the proverbially leaky vessel*.

Perhaps the best summation of women and their "issues" with boundaries, Carson writes (with a sidelong glance), is the myth of Danaos, in which 49 brides murder their bridegrooms on their wedding night. Their eternal punishment is gathering water in a sieve. Like Sisyphus, their companion in the underworld, the virgins are tethered to a task that will never be completed.

Bodies, female or otherwise, are leaky. They're imperfect vessels—skin is porous, memory has holes—even more so with the categories we project onto them for further containment. "We use 'body' to give material form to an idea that has no form, an as-

semblage that is abstract,” writes Legacy Russell¹. When we gender a body, we restrict it from becoming limitless, vast, “range-full” (per Russell); we take away the right to be blurry and unfixed. The proverbially leaky vessel.

Thousands of years after antiquity, formlessness is still perceived to be fatal, transgressive, chaotic; it punctures the thin membrane of control. We’re still fearful of what leaks. But if sieves aren’t good at containing things, it’s because they were never meant to be. Where sieves excel is in letting things through.

II. *To sift, separate*

One of the roots for *sieve* is the Indo-European *sehj*, meaning to drip or drizzle². But the prehistoric word for sieve is *kreidhrom*, a verb that means “to sieve a substance” (in this case assumed to be a dry one). It also means to distinguish or decide³. Sieves sift and separate: the stones from the grain, the grain from the corn, the good from the bad. There’s a logic to this leakage.

The first time I met Coral she talked to me about sea urchins. Not in water, but on a sun-drenched roof of the National Autonomous University of Mexico in Mexico City. She showed me aerial views on Google maps of the city she grew up in, a pixelated patchwork of red, and explained that red is the color of an impermeable material regularly used to waterproof roofs.

Then she zoomed in to one rooftop in particular, the university’s, where rows of red flat-topped pyramids held cratered white domes, a remnant of the wave of mid-century modernism that had swept through the city. They appear like the dried-out skeletons of sea urchins but function like skylights. They let light in but keep water out.

Unlike Hydra, the mythological sea monster whose nine heads only multiply further when they’re cut off—horrifying in her mutability—real sea creatures are actually very logical in their design. However unusual and alien looking, every aspect of their form

comes down to its function. With no eyes, brain, legs, or means of propulsion, sea urchins use their protective spines and tiny adhesive tube feet to move, very slowly, across the ocean floor.

Since their spiny form makes them incredibly sensitive to light and touch, their whole bodies can be thought of as one big compound eye. Their outer skeleton comprises ten plates fused together, like the slices of an orange, in a rounded formation. You can see it after a sea urchin dies and dries out, and its spines fall off, leaving a pattern of tiny raised holes that look like intricate beading.

Long and tubular, slick and pitted, as expressive as invertebrates, Coral’s Pierced Vessels are too alive to merely be tools (of eternal damnation or otherwise). Fascinated by the domes atop the university, she started making her own out of clay, turning them upside down so they became drains, sieves, then sculptures—glazed and stacked like totems. Others are cylindrical, like pieces of a giant piping system poked with dozens of small holes.

A vessel is both a thing to contain and a thing through which to move, a passageway. To pierce a vessel—to make sieve—is to be left with a pile of holes. It’s to concede that to hold is not the same as to enclose.

III. *To refuse, remain*

There is a logic to this leakage, a warp and a weft. Another root for sieve is *reh-*, which in the Baltic languages is related to the word for a fishing net. The Hebrew word for sieve, *kebarah*, has the stem *kabir*, as in something woven, like a cloth or net. Or maybe like a web...

“A web allows things to fall through, like a sieve,” says Adrienne Marie Brown in an interview for the Scalability Project⁴, where she likens a relationship to a spiderweb, diaphanous yet strong. “Some things are not meant to be caught. The things that are meant to be caught and held will nourish us.”

One of the reasons I think the Anne Carson essay has stayed with me is how struck I was by her transformation of the ancient

idea of formlessness. Through her writing, she subtly morphs it from something dangerous and undesirable in Greek myth into something powerful and covetable. Why would anyone want to be hot, dry sand when you could be cool, mutable water? Who would want to be contained, rather than seek out, revel, and remain in the slippage?

I was reminded of it again with Coral's vessels, which she gives form to only to continually transform: stacking them, breaking them into shards, imprinting them on paper, and leaving them to the elements. Which are also reinterpretations of the ancient made anew. No one would mistake these vessels as symbols of chastity or instruments of futility; they have a sort of animism, and they seem to be questioning their own form. What, exactly, is a vessel meant to do? What catches hold, and what makes it through?

Sitting with Coral's work has made me wonder if there's a state that's between form and formlessness, that holds but also shifts. I thought of mist, the substance of slippage, the thin state between appear and disappear.⁵ And then I thought of Madeline Gin.

"I appear on a page which would otherwise be blank. I, the mist, the agent," Gin writes in her book *Word Rain*, wherein the line between reader and narrator gently dissolves. "I was picking up the meaning without stopping to accumulate words. Speed. I loved it. Soon it would be over. The words stuck to the mist, I to the meaning." In the next pages of the book, as the narrator speed reads, most words are replaced by " - - - ;" the text is riddled with holes.

To slip, slide, glide, leak. To glitch, to get caught. To resist form, or to take every form. To refuse: a negation coupled with affirmation. Why else would you poke in order to fill?

References (01–72), or selections from *Notes on Pierced Vessels* by Coral Saucedo Lomelí

1. in her book *Glitch Feminism*
 2. Ibid.
 3. from "Around the Sieve. Motif, Symbol, Hermeneutic" by Barbara Baert
 4. <https://scalabilityproject.org/interviews/conversation-is-not-a-masters-tool/>
 5. Adapted from Jean-Luc Godard's *Detective and I*
- line about what the truth looks like. "It's between appearing and disappearing."