

An abstract painting featuring a central figure rendered in warm, textured tones of orange, yellow, and brown. The figure is set against a dark, almost black background that is heavily textured with white and grey speckles, suggesting a grainy or stippled effect. The overall composition is vertical and expressive, with visible brushstrokes and a sense of depth.

**THE
UNDERWATER
AMERICAN
SONGBOOK**

REBECCA PYLE



UNDERWATER NEW YORK

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THE UNDERWATER AMERICAN SONGBOOK

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The poems in *The Underwater American Songbook* loosely form a lost-and-found musical: a body of almost-lyrics about objects found underwater all around New York. Like *The American Songbook*—a vast trove of nostalgic, revivable twentieth-century Broadway tunes and other popular standards—*The Underwater American Songbook* suggests water having had an amberizing effect, storing and keeping various objects now storied, illuminated—on poetry page.

THE UNDERWATER AMERICAN SONGBOOK

REBECCA PYLE

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AS IF WAITING TO BE SET: THE WHIRLING LOST OBJECTS, IN SPACE

There is a Formica dinette in the East River

Manhattan

Sitting upright

As if waiting to be

Set.

Right off 16th Street.

But carry me to the logic

Of the table: it is the compass

Whether it is square, or round, or oblong

Or patterned with fake pearl or wild mica bits

Making it here, everywhere, like

Flattened sheared gem.

Set the hands, like the long ends of mustache

Working their way all over the table-clock

Clock, celebrating the earth-and-ground-glory of the train:

The locomotive the steam engine headed anywhere to the

Railmens' tune: Greenwich Mean Time.

All the trainmen always checking their watches; they've

Systemized the world. Dinner's on time, so's surly breakfast,

So's travel.

Forget the sun making its dimple biscuit somewhere or

The moon larding us with its cold-plate oyster-cream;

Pity the sun and

Moon, they're the whirled or whirling lost objects

In space.

We have math, we have time?

Oh, we had time.

THE DREAMLAND BELL

The year before he died
I remember how
He always parked
Too far from the curb, strange
Angles, but never a ticket.
Angling away from the
Pier.

He became emotional
About old amusement parks: told
Many about the submerged bell
From
Wonderland, off Chelsea Pier;
The Dreamland Bell.
Talked of its colors, how a color really
Was more interesting when it faded than
When it was new. Salt he said
(Overbrightly)
Had made that
Desperate beautiful patina.

His eyes
Glittered like blue lonely ice:
To others he was almost
Santa Claus without the suit,
Without the North Pole,
Clownish, his tall
Black boots
That said *here I come.*

I remember dogs
Would run to him
Their vitality—on crazed display.
He simply held out his hands
To let them sniff;
As if warming them, by fire.

This somehow like his
Wide-berth askew parking at
Curbs, careless act-out of goodbye,
Amused, like Odysseus,
That dogs saw him, loved him still:
That he smelled to them like something
Vital or living.

He was
Not underwater yet, not yet
History like a badly aimed
Torpedo or submarine. Not a
Fish belly-up, even sideways: still whole
And here.

They told me later he knew
He had a date with death
Soon.
No one wanted to talk much
About him, A.D. We tried not to think of his strange
Joy about that miserable sunken bell, brought up to
Make money for the harbor (dollar a ring was
The going price, for the Harbor Fund)
Whose every museum ring and ring
Could not bring back the dead.
The cups of hot water
He said over and over they loved to drink in Japan.
Has almost a flavor, he kept telling us. His surprised
Looking at dogs as they sniffed his hands. The wide
Sea-swale
Parking too far from the curb, like
Clumsy beaching whale.
His heart, his unfixable aorta arch
Hidden in his parka.

It was good, he said.
The hot water. *That's one beautiful bell from
Underwater or Hell*, he said. But his eyes were

Trying to be
Bright as the bell once new.
It made no sense to us, his glee about its
Beauty and its demise, the death of Coney Island's
Dreamland, brought down by fire
Symbolized by the bell fallen
The pier flaming, down into water with flames.
It broke him, I know now, even sank him,
The pain of the
Thought of real bell ringing:
Its discordance, its untimedness,
The ringing, the parking of cars, the
Accidental but recurring
Masses and mazes of people strolling
Boardwalks, able to ring bell without
Thinking ever of the high true last brakework
Of a heart. Yesterday, today, next year
The aimless much more slowly dying pier-walkers
Seeking specific and orderly
Amusements, while his own blood was
Knocking at the broad terror
Of an expanding and stretching
Arch of the heart, soon to
Ring through like rapture,
Arrival at a last blood-true pier,
Dwindle him into rust of sea,
Dissolve him, unlose him,
Sink him.

WE WITH SUBMARINE

*Quester I Submarine, Coney Island Creek.
Forever submerged. This man-made submarine
Was originally built by Jerry Bianco
To dive the ill-fated Andrea Doria.*

*Needless to say, it turned out to be
Ill-fated as well. See a photo [here](#).*

Tell me the day Jerry Bianco dreamed of
The launch of that submarine ready to dive.
A pure day
Blue was blue and white was white,
And never a harsh word spoken.
And we all, we with submarine,
Would have reasons. If the reasons made noise they were
Good, and stated. If all present believed they were doing
Something sure and good, we must proceed. His name was
Bianco, and of course that means white. And white has never
Done wrong? It has only suffered wrong? Ask the gods
And goddesses. If they all wear white
We all as one—must proceed.
Find the *Andrea Doria*, dive her sorrowful hold.

But what if we were wrong?
Pitying the *Andrea Doria*? What if poor *Andrea Doria* struck
Broadside by *The Stockholm* in the dark and delicious night wanted
To sink and die, it was written in star-cards, nineteen fifty
Six? What if the dying of many turned into some good, forestalled
Some nameless tragedy or sorrow, we will never see?
What if it was good brisk walk to death, necessary conversation
Many had with themselves before they went down, and
What if a modern Ocean, minus its gods, was hungry?
What if the *Quester I* must sink in mud? Stay away?
I just
Read today of a woman
Whose habit she claimed was long ago to play gods and

Goddesses with cousins. Normal play, modern games
Were not enough. Hear a train rumble by my old gray house?
I have never heard the train rumbling by when I did not want
For one second
To be dead, did not wonder if the train rolling over you
Is painful, or fully efficient, delicious, a snap. There is a poetry
Group in town called *I Just Want to Die*. Well, of course, we
All do, except for our illusion—we are needed here
And the fact another fine meal is coming
I haven't eaten yet.

I am not in a fine mood today. But sometimes
Just as a cruise-ship-maker wants to dress up
A ship, its ridiculous lobbies piped loud full of pop tunes
I want to dress up, similarly,
Death. Give that lost figure finer cape, more swirl
Dimension, heaviness. He knows his square dance job:
We should forget ourselves. Let him play vile director
Of substitutions. Let him run the play. Sink the ship and
The submarine. Why not.
Sink the poets.

I do not want to be young again.
The world was too hard to decipher, distance too great
In the dark to take the letter my grandmother gave me—
To the mailbox.
The world in 1964 was busy playing bridge, too unwilling to
Tell children the truth. Unclage, parents,
Grandparents, played their cards, upstairs, drank cold drinks:
Lawn beautifully guarded by long rows, Lombardy poplars.
They barely noticed my return from the summer corner
From the dark. A man had grabbed me, between huge shrubs
Then let me go
When I cried *my grandmother lives—over there. She will*
Come save me!
He let me go.

Death

Brings itself like a tray of icy drinks

Like their trays of icy drinks, consolation at bridge table,

At the end. *Remember: whatever you think of, at the last,*

They say, *your last moment.*

That's your hand, that's what you've always been, that's your

Bid, that's how you go on—

That's you.

THERE ARE NO DEAD HORSES IN DEAD HORSE BAY

*Horse Bones/Animal Bones, Dead Horse Bay.
Hence the name.*

But there is no such thing as dead horses, or dead
Horse's bones. I have always known that, so have
Horses.

I say they run in a high-five five-seven-legged fever.

There is a shamanate of bones, which declares
These connectors of music which are horses' bones
Are now abandoned drum sets, only; like a shamed
Clown's pretext of exile from music, protecting
Him from having to try to prove he might be a
Musician, when he is not: *why, there's poor Yorick's
Drumset: not playable anymore.*

Something lies there, old pieces, broken and soft,
Something blue and borrowed, something mistaken,
Something only

To frivolize the water
With calcium, with carbonate,
Like old shells of lobsters
Or crabs, castles of crabs in sand, silicates:
Fadeable shimmering things, cloudlike whites.

Believe no one who speaks of dead horse bones
Or the bay that holds them. Horses are only
Now.

In the bays of water
Neither bays nor sorrels nor dappled
And grey horses
Exist in any sort of effluvium
As dead. Dignity

Too high: hooves the father of too much music
Music too fevered, the triangle of Pantheon
Engraved in them now.

Too galloped too deep in the frieze
Of Pantheon-now, of music, of time,
For tissue-delicate
Fading term of
Dead.

A CADILLAC IN WATER

*It was discovered, belly-up, in 1978,
Just a few feet off the end of old Steeplechase Pier.*

Methodist churchwomen like cheapness and
Cheer: they would rarely come looking
At the harbor for washed-up things. Such
Deputies of new! What would they
Think of the washed-up-nowhere Cadillac
Lincoln Continental
All its 1968 body belly-up toward the sun,
The man gone? That he'd wasted his
Money, should have been spiritual,
That there was a building with a
Bell in it, and an entryway
With square tiles that could have
Accepted apologies.
His sorrows.

Instead, the lingering Cadillac, Coney Island
Waters, lacking
Everything but a cad, and lust-poetry like
Lilacs that last in the doorway bloomed—
Couldn't he have moved
To the Midwest?
Sun-washed overweight over-chromed
And as
Unevolving as waste-of-time love,
This Cadillac would have been laughed at,
Out west, sold to some fool on his way to doom.
Drive a real car, practical car,
Churchwomen would think. Look what happened:
That car was worthless from the beginning. Perhaps
He did move to Iowa or Nevada or Indiana, and this
Car was the leftover of his New Yorking.

But churchwomen do not come
Looking for washed-up things unless
There is a sad story and fall and
Rise—like beer bottles become beach glass—
So they must quickly imagine there was a
Man in the car who found
Rightness, left behind
This Cadillac
Like a round
Crawl-out-of-it
Stone, Christ hitting him like a sunbeam
And this car was the assemblage of
All reassemblages, the forgivable
Grounded rocket ship with
Necessary errors: a clumsy flight plan.

The churchwomen
Only know a drive in the Cadillac would not
Have sent themselves off to somewhere they
Would have
Wanted to be. So imagine
My surprise when the churchwomen came
Looking at the Cadillac, and one of them said
I like its color, another said look at the fins,
And the third or fourth were soon looking it
Over, they too imagining the delightful saveable man
Who'd escaped, and stood now in deep purple salvia
Somewhere in Indiana, who thought now and
Then of the 1968 *Lincoln Continental*, his
Jesus, his sacrifice, his way of heading
To Indiana with nothing.

A KAWASAKI WAVERUNNER AND RUE

*This expensive piece of equipment—how did it end up
Buried and alone on a vacant beach? Plum Beach?*

The Kawasaki here is here because someone was
In over his head. A woman had outdone him. So
His sacrifice was the Waverunner, to make it
Double loss, to make it look like loss was all
Around. He and the Kawasaki. Instead of
The woman lost,
No beautiful single thing ever any more
In his windowsill. So great his shame.
The Kawasaki
Drowned—must be drowned.

We could be
Suckled by a creed outworn, a raggle end of
Army, Neptune's, every one of us only twenty-two,
All of us loss: listening double-collectors, regainers
Of horribly lost
Things, awardees of certificates in
Italics, all paid by each
Of us
With endless, endless *rue*.

KING ARTHUR REGARDING THE SIXTEEN HUNDRED BARS OF SILVER UNDERWATER

King Arthur spoke to me today.

Once and somewhere

France, now America,

Above Manhattan...

Said King Arthur out of rolling nameless

American straw-dry December hills between towns,

His voice as if from train window-glass, reverberating...

Are Unicorn Tapestries from France here and still being

Woven of green and flowering tears.

The unicorn has no way out.

Surrounded He is in the woods

He thought would save him.

The tapestries! You've been there. You know

The unicorn's soul is silver

Says Arthur. *Silver is where he came*

From and silver where he goes.

He—that froth-white unicorn

He could die, fail, pale, fall dead in America!

In the tapestries in The Cloisters

High in Manhattan! (I squint my eyes.)

In the tapestries

There the men--they stand there Their gold and

Silver knives Their gold-and-silver-tipped

Bows and arrows poised. I'll tell You

What's saving Him: You, you stalwart women

And the sixteen hundred

Bars of silver still There in Arthur Kill.

Between New Jersey and Staten Island.

Waiting. Never to be touched, no. Never.

*The key to the silver is you women
Who have visited The Cloisters and
Signed not Your real name but a wishful
Name, the last name of the man You loved ever,
Each most, and hopelessly entered
Into The Cloisters guest book, no real address:
Those wishing-well names guard the unicorn.*

*The unicorn
Will only lose His life if one of those women
You
Who writes your Dream Name in guestbook
Swims down
To bring up silver bar by bar. Up. And
None will: all of You want the moon-unicorn
To live Your dying dreams or dream
With you, beneath the water
The tapestry garden, the Cloisters, its echo—*

*Down there with the silver
The water is playing some random tune that
Real orchestras
Could only
Badly imitate, in America.*

*The new name for Arthur Kill is Unicorn Lives, Arthur tells me.
Don't take swimming lessons, says Arthur. Don't meet with
Marine scientists. Don't tell anyone what
Name You signed into the guestbook. Arthur lives and Unicorn
Knows your golden and silver Deceits. The dreadfulness of
Hours. And guestbooks. And Names.*

*That silver
Is below,
Tarnished dark. Kill is Dutch for fresh water. Yonkers
Is Dutch for Young Lord. The silver is tarnished, dark
As Night as hidden weapons, dark tarnish-blue-and-green.
Underneath the tarnish patina murk it's pure and bright.*

Sterling ours. Excalibur.

On the train I have a headache, burning deep. The glass
Shines so. I almost, almost sleep. Arthur and Merlin—
What do they know.

SHIPWRECKS ALL OVER

(Written, in Salt Lake City, in a hospital's emergency waiting room.)

I have something to tell you
Dying will be a wash of blue.

Add silver too.

Forget ghosts of *Ice Cream Trucks*
Demolished Teapots
Somewhere a whole teapot
A Ceiling Fan—Bronx River—
Messages in a bottle
Ice Cream Trucks, Lower Hudson.
Ice cream trucks
Never
Sold me ice cream that brought
Me you.

Death is only a wash of blue,
Final laundry.

The world then was stamps
And envelopes, and how you
Handwrote a person's name,
Remembered their address
How you dared
To call someone on the phone.

A tiny Hindenburg is ours, one oceanologists
Never will find. All blue metals, all silvers
And fine. Miniature: big enough for one of us.
Me.
You feel it in
You, a Hindenburg heart, as you turn jogging
Beyond a
Bend of green. Riverside Drive. What stubby

*Winglets it has, you think, how did it
Fly?*

*What would it feel like to be
Inside it, hear me, listen
To me from my wash of blue? This airbubblecraft
Is our envelope, message from me, expired,
To longer-living you.*

I like its portholes, its coldness
And warmth. Unhindered.

Wash of blue: full.
And silver, too.

A RUNAWAY LUGGAGE CAR, 1865, OFF PEEKSKILL DRAWBRIDGE

Timeline.

When the luggage train car went runaway
Flew off the Peekskill Drawbridge
New York, 1865, the living passengers
Exulted: they were alive.
Their luggage car was doomed but
The dream of rescue
Is love?

I wish
One hundred fifty years later—
You and I the living now
Had known about this luggage car flying
Runaway, hurtling into depths:
Seen with the eyes of owls or Scotland
Our lives as they would rush by,
Had known that
Water
Holds in some diverse or inverse equation
Both sleeping and sleepless
Youth. Youth is dancing there
In deep water as if dreaming there
In crazy pajamas
Fabric fluttering, young wanting to dance
As if insane
But unable: water never likes
Much unseemliness.
It tamps it down. Tells Houdini
To go away. .

I am a fierce magician, you could have said.

You are male: I surely would have
Believed you, those years—ago.
All I needed was intent.

Needed signs
Like fortune cookies' single slip
Of paper like one lone sock
On clothesline.

You, you with your distant cloud
Of face, your slow strange remoteness, could
Have rescued us, if you had insisted
You saw our futures—knew that
Youth would—drown.

Timeline—

There beneath the Peekskill Drawbridge
Luggage car, that one, persists:
Resolute buttons,
Hooks, clasps: dulling leather gloves
Embroidery thread popular then
Keeping faint sharp rose of color.
Despite water's green, that thread's rosy red.
The cases leather and fitted and precise and fine:
Tanned, preserved: still latched and closed, ever
Now time and dark and water the secretive judge
And juror whether
We are magic enough to transcend
The unclairvoyant: if all lies and truths
Someday, clothing, hats,
Dark and in wobbly tatters.
Off the Peekskill Drawbridge
Are redeemable, worthwhile,
By actions—of former wearers.

Still living, you and I do not even know
Where each other ever are:
In the moment before death, for example, I am
Sure
You will think of someone else.
But I am above grief.
Could it be we are underwater—as we live?

You and I for example? *Never* awake?
I see you easily in the clothes of 1865:
Your pale pale face, your night-dark
Hair, your delicateness though male.
You so like Poe's image in
That dark postage stamp made a dozen
Years ago:
That bright white
Shirt, stone forehead, stony eye
Lost rose
Of a face.
The luggage car runaway such a symbol for our
Noncomprehension—our dizzied awkwardness
Which was *gracefulness*.
Our letters? *Never written*.
Your eyebrows rose
So much in question.
Where was I? What was I? Distraction.

Timeline.

Prideful suitcase or two of remnants
Some buttons and some hooks and gloves
Resolute-survived.
Consider: our quiet low-imagination,
Given-up civil war
With the future, and 1865:
And that the bad luck
Of then
Is now ours.

A MINISTER'S EX-WIFE, CONTEMPLATING THE PRINCESS ANNE STEAMSHIP LONG AGO BROKEN IN TWO, ROCKAWAY SHOALS

*The captain missed the turn
And the Princess Anne Steamship ended up
On Rockaway Shoals.*

I, just divorced, woman, sixty, was the very floor
Of that steamship. Its varnished floor breaking—that
Was me.

I was always headed to Doom married to minister,
King of carpentry and Jesus-doom,
Lord of Brand Names of God.

Slats of wood held me up, illusionism!
I was the woman waiting to be sawn—in two,

Inside the holy box of pine. I descendant of
American witch-doomed.
She, buried in Salem. *Drowned*
Says her tombstone, Salem.
Drowned what was written if you failed test for goodness—
For being wise, for being defiant, for having a Ph.D. in
Refusal to be Foolish
Parrots Like All the Rest.

Did her drownedness prove she was witch?
Or was she drowned
As punishment? Tell me as you would tell me why
Newspaper stories, New York, say *the crew of the Princess Anne
Steamship refused to leave without their luggage. Then nine days
Later
Ship split in two
On the shoals, and they were rescued.*
Verily, as I was rescued
From God and

The whole weaving cleaving sieving chessboard
Of ministers
By Divorce.

We women the floor of every man's project; men—the ceiling.
I dared to stare
Pure—I thought safe and hidden inside my husband's
Castle-warship, American-landed battlefield—of church.
Tick-tack repeated religious ritualry—little tired pots, brass, smoke,
Also water, trapped in vials, but coffee no mystery, all old Folgers in
Tins. Where's charity?
All ground coffee
Is fragrant—with breakfast rolls.
Our clothes—enough newness and whiteness and crispy white
Collars
To cleanse us of our cinnamon sticky-bun eternal sweet
Dirt. (What are ministers' wives? The holy blessing wash wagon and
The cheer. The tide. The doomed and broken era. Harbor-wide eyes
And slow blinking-away of drear. We are breakfast rolls, and coffee.
The service, the help, the relentless blue
Buried toiling ocean hymn
Of the bed.) (Sing it: a tired chorus in the bay.)

So ship's gone down, *and the crew stayed nine days on
The Princess Anne in bitter cold weather refusing to leave
Without their luggage.* How defiant!
(*Lifeboats could hold only them, not their luggage.*)
We deserve our luggage too, this refusal said,
Deserve it more even. Than passengers.

*And then still without aid—
The Princess Anne began to split in two.*
Rescue then, at last:
The crew jumped into rescue boat grateful
Without luggage, following each other
For their lives.
As my
Grandmother one dozen grandmothers ago

In Salem
Would have been glad—
For simple
Living, breathing.

The boat split in two on Rockaway Shoals.

Consider Eve: she wanted credit for her own
Damned rib, she wanted to say the snake
Was God's and Adam's personification,
Not hers; she wanted back her island, Amazons.
But no, instead came
Book of Hebrew men, temples by male Greeks
Counting out of males' war-making ship-making power and
Descended mens' testicles and coins and hoarding names.
Hardwood floors, honeying varnish, centuries of meals
Males in England playing drunken
Darts, pubs.
Bows and arrows long ago stripped away.
We. Handed washtubs.
Tea towels, coffee plates, cheery breakfast wear; white collars
Puritan-spotless. Teapots. But our eyes—look at mine:
How many thousands of flecks of doubt are in these?
My eyes not one brown
But almost a hundred browns and hazels and golds and
Ice shivers of blue still left from Salem:
All I've endured, dear gods, being trod on.
Like *the Princess Anne Steamship*, high-varnished floor
Headed all this time to
Breaking. There's a swayback in the boards:
The help so proudly *refusing to go without their luggage*
To whatever new and awful shore they have
Left, in America.

I say forget your luggage and your pride, unless your

Luggage can become boat:
Never sail again.

Unless you have *better luggage*:
Unbreakable, waterproofed: luggage
That can truly become boat and breath,
Delivery from evil:
Sturdy, living magic:

Unsinkable life-raft to island, swift as bird,
No matter the cold.

REBECCA PYLE was named for a character, a novel, and a movie (*Rebecca*, by Daphne du Maurier; the movie *Rebecca*, Hitchcock's). An interesting alignment with *Underwater New York* is that the fictional character Rebecca, Rebecca deWinter, is at book and movie's end found at last underwater, off the southwest shore of England.

Rebecca Pyle graduated from the University of Kansas, a university beloved by the Wizard of Oz and once the college home of writers William Inge, William Stafford, and Daniel Woodrell. Once she almost won The National Poetry Competition in the United Kingdom, sharing the first prize purse with Irish poet Medbh McGuckian.

Rebecca Pyle has lived in New York City and in Buffalo, New York, but she lives now in Utah, between the Great Salt Lake and the gorgeous old mountain mining town where the Sundance film festival takes place each winter.

Rebecca's poetry, fiction, and artwork have appeared in *Cobalt Review*, *Indian Review*, *Bangalore Review*, *Roanoke Review*, *New England Review*, *Emerson Review*, *William and Mary Review*, *Stoneboat*, *Poor Yorick*, *Map Literary*, and over a dozen other art and literary journals. Her art website is www.rebeccapyleartist.com.

Cover image: *Mermaids, Violins, Relics, New York*, by Rebecca Pyle
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