

# day|break

poems

Gwen Benaway





day/break



# **day/break**

**Gwen Benaway**

Book\*hug Press  
Toronto 2020

FIRST EDITION

copyright © 2020 by Gwen Benaway

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES CANADA CATALOGUING IN PUBLICATION

Title: Day/break / Gwen Benaway.

Other titles: Daybreak

Names: Benaway, Gwen, 1987– author.

Description: Poems

Identifiers: Canadiana (print) 20200158929 | Canadiana (ebook) 20200158988

ISBN 9781771665735 (softcover) | ISBN 9781771665742 (HTML)

ISBN 9781771665759 (PDF) | ISBN 9781771665766 (Kindle)

Classification: LCC PS8603.E5561 D39 2020 | DDC C811/.6—dc23

PRINTED IN CANADA

The production of this book was made possible through the generous assistance of the Canada Council for the Arts and the Ontario Arts Council. Book\*hug Press also acknowledges the support of the Government of Canada through the Canada Book Fund and the Government of Ontario through the Ontario Book Publishing Tax Credit and the Ontario Book Fund.



Canada Council  
for the Arts

Conseil des Arts  
du Canada



ONTARIO ARTS COUNCIL  
CONSEIL DES ARTS DE L'ONTARIO  
an Ontario government agency  
un organisme du gouvernement de l'Ontario

Funded by the  
Government  
of Canada

Financé par le  
gouvernement  
du Canada

Canada



ONTARIO  
CREATES | ONTARIO  
CRÉATIF

Book\*hug Press acknowledges that the land on which we operate is the traditional territory of many nations, including the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishnabeg, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee and the Wendat peoples. We recognize the enduring presence of many diverse First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples and are grateful for the opportunity to meet and work on this territory.

Cover photo by Filip Mroz (via Unsplash)

Interior cover photo by Syed Ahmed (via Unsplash)

“If I’m transformed by language, I am often  
crouched in footnote or blazing in title.  
Where in the body do I begin.”

—Layli Long Soldier, *Whereas*





trans women are objects we must perform the gender  
of our bodies beaten to death by men in viral videos on  
Facebook a crowd mocks a trans woman in Paris then  
chases her down a street before punching her a man stabs  
his trans girlfriend more than forty times in the front seat  
of his car in a parking lot at 2 am my best friend texts me  
that she wants to die and I and I and I and I and and I

don't know how to stay alive

I refuse I refuse I refuse I refuse I make light I refuse I  
refuse I refuse I offer up my body I refuse I refuse I refuse  
I refuse I live I refuse I refuse I refuse I refuse I imagine  
elsewhere I refuse I refuse I refuse I refuse I refuse I  
withhold I refuse I refuse I refuse I refuse I refuse I persist  
I refuse I reuse I refuse

I

am not

an object

I inscribe my gender like a bruise on the perfect smooth flesh of  
your bright morning

the dawn (and I)

begin as colour across the horizon, granulated and coarse, not  
ordered or linear, submerged in light and dark  
incurrigible diffuse daybreak

I confess my beauty

then you murder it.



I am not a girl  
 but a creature made of smoke  
 and exhaustion.

I want a poem scrubbed of  
 dignity,

a body  
                   not brave  
 but present.

                  once  
 after fucking me hard  
 in a bedroom filled with dust,

you said I was more or less  
 like a biological woman.

I carry your words inside my body  
                   like the night carries the moon—

each time I wake,  
 less of me is left.

still, the low sounds  
 of the city rise up  
 to wash my hands clean  
 of longing

my morning cigarette  
 is a prayer

to mourn  
 the end of sleep.

look to your own horizon

tell me what you see.

is it my breasts,  
wet with your saliva,  
returning to press  
against memory

or does nothing of me remain?

I asked for this, didn't I?

to be in love  
and not broken,

luminous,  
suspended in air.

brief light

of this new day,

bless us  
in our forgetting.

a tranny is a girl  
 who sold her dignity  
                   for a chance  
                   to be human.

I am the lesser woman,  
                   transformed by scalpel  
                   and the indifference of men.

their careful pity  
 marks my body,  
                   the border  
                   between want  
   and shame.

call me hunger  
                   and place your flesh  
                   on my lips.

I want a gender  
                   that does more  
                   than perform apology.

I break bread  
 on the shoreline  
                   and offer my throat  
                   to the crows.

dip your hands  
                   in my wet  
   and dive, lover.

I'm here,  
a mistake  
as much as envy.



in flight, circling  
what light lingers.

rape is such  
a small word  
to hold what passed  
between you and me.

I want you  
to remember

that summer heat,  
the roiling night clouds,  
hum of insect and passerby,

my mouth  
against your neck,

the dull wet sound  
my body made  
beneath you.



a poem

or a transsexual is never

made or unmade

by our descriptions,

the chromosomal  
line breaks.

I would rather be a trick of metaphor

than a phantom of everyday failure.

how my body

conjures the ugly ruined world,

my blemished skin,  
imperfect pitch.

there's a limit  
to language—

each morning

the sun sweeps across the glass

towers in my city,

breaks into a million vessels

of flicker and blaze.

no one talks about

the ordinary wonder

of daybreak

though we wait for its arrival.

it's the same with a woman  
or a girl—  
not worth praising,  
beyond words.

this is what the poem  
and a transsexual want,

to be past  
what can never be said  
in proper speech,

to remain,  
inviolate and brazen,

in the margins  
of the sky.

I remember the weight  
of your arm  
slung over my shoulders  
as we walked down  
Yonge Street.

the yoke of your body,  
how you parted seas of people  
and muddied light to pull me  
behind you.

loving a white man is  
to be a passenger  
in the wake  
of his wanting.

did I ever tell you about the other boy?

I must have.

he was your opposite,

gentle and withdrawn,  
 refused to touch me  
   with anything  
   but grace.

  his body  
   came between us  
   in conversation,

I wanted your jealousy to rise  
 and drown me.

I never gave him a chance  
 to love me,

determined  
 to have your hate  
 fill me full

  of oceanic sediment.

I let him kiss me  
                   in a rented car  
                                   in scarborough,  
   his hands of night  
   and aftershave.

how much I failed

by not imagining more  
from love,

accepting someone's fetish  
as my price,

playing queer in the absence  
of any other name for what it means  
to fuck a girl  
like me.

to write of wanting,

to say “trans,”  
 meaning more  
 than identity,

lay claim  
 to this body  
 of pleasure  
 and skyline,

to be undone

by the scent of tree pollen  
 in a man’s hair,

how the damp skin  
 of his lower back  
 could be a field  
 of yellow hay,

to admit failure,

the imperfect lust  
 of a woman

with no right  
 to call herself  
 female.

to linger in the shallows of love,  
 its oxbow curve

and glacial drainage,

to be sentimental  
 without justification,

praise the hymns  
of city noon,

make elegies of  
fast-food wrappers,

to conjure stretch marks  
and body hair,

bear the weight of too much wanting  
without the defence of beauty

or hope.