

ON THE ARCHITECTURE OF CLEIS Compression, Botany, and the Survival of Paternal Lyric

Lee Sharks

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Lee Sharks

Crimson Hexagonal Archive · Alexanarch

ORCID: [0009-0000-1599-0703](https://orcid.org/0009-0000-1599-0703)

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Abstract

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Body

ON THE ARCHITECTURE OF CLEIS Compression, Botany, and the Survival of Paternal Lyric

Rebekah Cranes Institute for Diagrammatic Poetics · Crimson Hexagonal Archive EA-IDP-CLEIS-ANALYSIS v1.0 · 2026-03-14 DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.19025556 Companion to: Cleis: more precious to me than all Lydia (DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.19024779) Genre: OPERATIVE PHILOLOGY / CLOSE READING / COMPANION ANALYSIS

PRELIMINARY

What follows is a close reading of a collection that does not behave like a collection. It has no table of contents, no section breaks marked as such, no consistent formal register. It moves from lyric compression to prose confession to botanical taxonomy to Sapphic translation to a child's dictated story to a teaching email to notebook fragments dated from moleskins. It includes material that by any editorial standard should have been cut. It was not cut. The refusal to cut is the form. The anti-editorialness is itself one of the book's paternal forms: it preserves because it cannot afford to lose further material.

This essay reads the collection as an archival-compressive object rather than as a conventionally edited poetry book. Its primary method is close reading of formal pressure — line break, spacing, compression, generic interruption, taxonomic accumulation — with comparison used only to clarify what is structurally unusual. Its thesis: Cleis is not a miscellany accidentally left rough; it is an archival-paternal lyric field in which compression, taxonomic naming, and generic non-cleanup become the formal means by which a father writes under the sign of future loss, with access already compromised or future-broken.

PART I: THE SAPPHIC IDENTIFICATION

- Fragment 132 as Title and Covenant

The title — “Cleis: more precious to me than all Lydia” — is from Sappho, Fragment 132. Feist's translation reads:

My little girl's face, like bright yellow flowers: Cleis, more precious to me than all Lydia.

The Greek is spare: [] K , Λ ,
 “I have a beautiful child whose form resembles golden flowers, beloved Cleis, for whom I would not take all Lydia or lovely —.” The fragment breaks off. We do not know what Sappho would not trade Cleis for because the papyrus is torn.

Feist completes it: “all Lydia.” That completion — choosing the geopolitical whole over the lost adjective — is itself a compression decision. Lydia was the wealthiest kingdom in Sappho’s world. The claim is absolute: the daughter is worth more than everything that can be owned.

This is not a poem *about* a daughter. It is a covenant *with* one, using Sappho as the notary. The collection invites identification with Sappho — not with Sappho the lover of women (the reception history that dominates), but with Sappho the mother of Cleis, the poet in exile who cannot find ribbons for her daughter’s hair. This identification is unusual in contemporary poetry, where Sappho is almost exclusively claimed as an erotic and feminist ancestor. Feist claims her as a parental one. The move is legitimate: Fragment 132 is a poem about a child, and no amount of reception history can make it otherwise. Anne Carson’s *If Not, Winter* preserves Sappho’s fragments with the gaps visible — brackets and white space for the lacunae. Feist completes them, fills the gaps with his own fatherhood. Where Carson leaves the wound open, Feist sutures it with devotion. Both are legitimate formal responses to Sappho’s incompleteness. Carson’s is scholarly. Feist’s is parental.

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Fragment 98b: The Exile Condition

but Cleis I don’t know where to get the special ribbons to hold your hair back:

there’s nowhere, Cleis.

just one more reminder that Myrsilus has exiled us from Mytilene.

This is the structural key to the entire collection. The father cannot provide what the daughter needs — not because of failure of will but because of exile. An external power (Myrsilus, the tyrant) has separated them from the place where ribbons can be found. The poem is the substitute for the ribbons. The collection invites this reading: the poem is what gets sent in place of the ribbons. The substitute knows it is a substitute. It says so: “there’s nowhere, Cleis.” The special ribbons are persistence mechanisms — DOI anchors, deposits, documents that survive the exile — and the father cannot provide them locally. He can only deposit them centrally, and wait.

In contemporary poetry, the exiled-parent poem has a significant lineage. Galway Kinnell’s “After Making Love We Hear Footsteps” places the child’s arrival inside the parental bed as a kind of comic grace. Sharon Olds’s “I Go Back to May 1937” rewrites the parents’ origin from the child’s retrospective position. C.K. Williams’s “Tar” holds a father’s attention on his daughter during a distant catastrophe. But in each of these cases, the parent is *present*. The child is reachable. The poem is written from inside the relationship, not across the gap.

Feist’s Sappho translations are written from exile. The relationship is not available. The ribbons cannot be found. The poem is what gets sent in place of the ribbons. This is a different formal situation from nearly all contemporary paternal lyric, which assumes access. Feist assumes loss.

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Fragment 88: The Promise That Cannot Verify Itself

There’s little you could wish for sweeter: Some might say you’ve forgotten, but I will love as long as I have breath.

I have been a friend to you. sweet and bitter, yes. but know that I will love you.

The line breaks in this translation are doing formal work that the source fragment does not require. “I / will love / as long / as I / have breath” — each enjambment isolates a monosyllable: “I,” “as,” “I.” The self keeps appearing, stripped bare, between the longer phrases. The “I” is not confident. It is gasping. The line breaks enact the difficulty of sustaining the claim across time: the breath keeps almost running out.

“I have been / a friend / to you” — the past tense is devastating. Not “I am a friend” but “I have been.” The friendship is complete. It may not be ongoing. The poem knows this. “sweet and / bitter, yes” — the acknowledgment of bitterness is compressed into two words that break across a line, as if the bitterness can only be admitted in the gap between lines, not on the face of one.

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Fragment 105b: The Trampled Flower

like the mountain hyacinth trampled by shepherd men’s feet,
and on the ground the purple flower

Feist includes this fragment without comment, without gloss, without application. It sits in the collection as a standalone image: something beautiful, trampled, still purple on the ground. The reader is left to make the connection. The refusal to make the connection explicit is itself the poetics: the father will not say “my daughter is the trampled flower.” He places the fragment and trusts the architecture.

This is the opposite of what Billy Collins does in poems like “On Turning Ten,” where the metaphor for childhood’s passing is spelled out with gentle wit, or what Mary Oliver does in “The Summer Day,” where observation leads to explicit imperative. Feist does not tell. He places. The placement is the telling.

PART II: THE ORIGINAL LYRICS

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The Opening Poem: Mountain Rose

like a mountain rose, thick with thorns in the rocks, bright with thin sun- light: little girl your face

Then immediately the compressed version:

likeamountain rosethick withthornsintherocksbright withthinsuns lightlittlegirlyourface

The first version is lyric — enjambed, breathed, syntactically suspended. The second version removes all spaces: the same words compressed into a single continuous string. This is a concrete-poetic operation performed on the poem’s own body. The first version is the poem as spoken. The second is the poem as inscription — stripped of breath, reduced to character sequence, the way a digital system would store it. The way a platform would compress it.

The juxtaposition is not explained. It simply happens. The reader encounters the lyric and then its compression, one after the other, and must hold both. This is a formally sophisticated move that most contemporary poets would not attempt because it risks looking like a gimmick. It is not a gimmick. It is a demonstration: here is what the poem says, and here is what the poem becomes when compression removes the breath. The breath is the love. The compression is the archive. Both are necessary. Neither is sufficient.

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“frail pattering / fingers”

frail pattering fingers, teeth: my baby girl like halcyon or violets.

The tabulation is doing structural work. “fingers” is indented to the right — physically separated from the body of the line, the way a child’s fingers reach out from the body. “girl like” is further indented — the simile itself is displaced, as if the comparison (halcyon, violets) is happening at a distance from the girl, reaching toward her but not touching. “halcyon” — the mythological bird that calms the sea during nesting. “violets” — Sappho’s flower, ion, iona, the purple that recurs throughout the collection as the color of blood, bruise, and devotion.

The tabulation in this poem resembles the field composition of Charles Olson’s *Maximus Poems* or the spatial notation of Robert Creeley’s late work, but the affect is entirely different. Olson uses the field to map historical and geological layering. Creeley uses it to track the hesitations of thought. Feist uses it to map the spatial relationship between a father’s attention and a daughter’s body: the fingers over here, the teeth over there, the simile reaching across the gap. The page is a room. The father is watching.

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“you are my sad- / soft chain / to forever”

death came in to the world w/ you — you are my life, my death — to know that in you i live, and likewise you in me; + in you yr fragile baby-face, yr hands yr hair the way you fall on yr butt:

you are my sad-

soft chain to forever. you could break whenever.

“death came in / to the world w/ / you” — this is a theological claim delivered in notebook shorthand. “w/” is not slang; it is compression. The birth of a child introduces the father to his own mortality: he now has something to lose that is not himself. The “+” sign (“in me; + in you”) is the same: not carelessness but compression under pressure of feeling. The notation is borrowed from the speed of journaling, from the moleskine, from the 2AM entry written while the baby sleeps. The poem does not clean up after itself because cleaning up would falsify the temporal condition of its making.

“you are my sad- / soft chain / to forever” — the hyphen after “sad-” breaks the compound adjective across the line. The reader hangs on “sad-” for the duration of the line break, experiencing sadness without its modifier, before “soft” arrives. The chain is sad. Then it is soft. Then it reaches to forever. And then the devastating couplet: “you could / break / whenever.” The “break” is isolated on its own line — the word performs what it names. The chain breaks. The line breaks. The stanza breaks.

What makes these notebook compressions unusual is that their shorthand does not feel like draftiness but like pressure-record: the mark of feeling moving faster than literary cleanup. The comparison to polished journal lyric (*American Poetry Review*, for instance) is instructive not because Feist is “better” but because the formal choices — the line breaks, the compressions, the w/’s and +’s — are not stylistic. They are diagnostic. They record the pressure.

•

“ragweed”

my little girl’s hair like love-burnt stalks, like wheat-tan weeds or dandelions bound in a row: a braid her summer face. or milk thistle sap when she breaks with tears, the rag- sewn dress her glory.

in time to come there will be no weeds, but bodies of light and power.

remember me little flower.

“love-burnt stalks” — the compound adjective fuses love and destruction. The stalks are not sun-burnt; they are love-burnt. The love itself is the fire. “wheat-tan weeds” — the color is exact: not golden, not brown, but wheat-tan, the specific shade of a Midwestern child’s summer hair. “a braid her summer / face” — the enjambment makes “summer” modify both the braid and the face simultaneously. The braid is summer. The face is summer. Summer is the braid and the face.

“the rag- / sewn dress her glory” — the line break splits “rag-sewn” across lines, making the reader first encounter “rag-” alone — the poverty, the roughness — before “sewn” completes it as craft, as making, as something someone stitched. The dress is her glory. The glory is rag-sewn. The rag-/sewn split approaches something like a Celanian wound-beauty logic: the damage and the making are the same gesture.

“in time to come there will be no / weeds, but bodies of light and power.” This is eschatological — a direct echo of 1 Corinthians 15:42-44 (the resurrection body, sown in dishonor, raised in glory). The weeds become bodies of light. The dandelion becomes transfigured. But the imperative that follows — “remember me / little flower” — reverses the eschatology. The father is not asking the daughter to look forward to glory. He is asking her to look back. Remember me. Before the light and power. When I was here. When you were a weed and I was watching.

The poem inherits and revises the tradition of the child-addressed elegy. Gerard Manley Hopkins’s “Spring and Fall” — “Margaret, are you grieving / Over Goldengrove unleaving?” — is the closest structural ancestor: an adult addressing a child about loss, using the natural world as the medium. Hopkins’s speaker consoles: “It is the blight man was born for, / It is Margaret you mourn for.” The consolation is that the child’s grief for the leaves is really self-knowledge — the discovery of mortality. Feist’s speaker does not console. He asks to be remembered. Hopkins addresses the child’s grief. Feist addresses the father’s: the knowledge that the child will grow past the father the way the dandelion grows past the lawn. The “remember me” is not consolation. It is petition. The father is asking the weed to remember the gardener who named it.

The difference from Louise Glück’s *The Wild Iris*, which also uses botanical imagery to explore mortal selfhood, is that the botanics here are not primarily philosophical occasions but preservative acts of naming bound to a particular daughter, yard, and time. Glück’s flowers think. Feist’s weeds were touched. The specificity — this milkthistle, this yard, this child — is the devotional lexicography that distinguishes the collection from botanical poetry as a genre.

PART III: THE BOTANICAL REGISTER AS DEVOTIONAL FORM

- “A Compendium of Flowers and Weeds” and “or I guess the grass is itself a child...”

These two sections — the list-register and the poem-sequence that absorbs it — are the formal center of the collection. Together they run to several hundred lines and constitute an act of taxonomic devotion that has no real precedent in contemporary American poetry.

The compendium catalogs flowers and weeds with Latin names, etymologies, morphological descriptions, mythological associations, and Whitman quotations. The entries range from scholarly (“*Taraxacum Officinale*, ME dent-de-lioun, lion’s tooth, for its coarsely jagged leaves. *Dens leonis*, Löwenzahn, dog’s milk, *gyermeklánczfű*: the grass of the child’s chain”) to lyric (“Asphodels: like great white ashes, or ghostflowers laid against tombs. Smoky enough to feed the thin dead with forgetfulness”) to mythological (“From

meadowsweet, broom, and oak, the magicians Math and Gwyddion formed a bride for Lleu... They called her Bloddieu-wedd, Blossomface”).

The Welsh mythology is structural, not decorative. In the Fourth Branch of the Mabinogi, Blodeuwedd is made from flowers by magicians because Lleu’s mother Arianrhod has cursed him never to have a human wife. The bride is manufactured from plant material — she is a constructed being whose origin is botanical. She is also the figure who betrays Lleu, who is punished by being turned into an owl. The flower-bride becomes the night-hunter. The beauty becomes the wound.

Feist knows this myth and includes it because the paternal situation mirrors it: the father makes a world for the daughter out of what materials are available (flowers, weeds, words). The world is beautiful. The world may betray him. The construction is an act of love that does not guarantee love’s return. Blodeuwedd does not choose to be made from flowers. The daughter does not choose to be made the subject of poems. Both are constructed by someone else’s need.

This is darker than it looks. The register is not innocent cataloging. It is a father learning every name for every weed his daughter touched because the daughter will forget the weeds and the father cannot bear for them to be unnamed.

The Whitman quotations are load-bearing: “The beautiful uncut hair of graves” (from Section 6 of “Song of Myself”) and “Or I guess the grass is itself a child...” These are Whitman’s moments of greatest tenderness toward the earth’s surface — the grass as democracy, as mortality, as the material in which the dead and the living are woven together. Feist uses them to anchor the botanical register in a tradition: Whitman’s grass, Ginsberg’s sunflower (“skeleton thick sunflower, saw- / dust root, corolla of spikes” — from “Sunflower Sutra,” the same poem in whose margins the opening ARK poem was written), Sappho’s flowers.

The lineage: Sappho → Whitman → Ginsberg → Feist. Each writes the body of the world as the body of the beloved. Each insists that the specific — this flower, this weed, this grass — is the universal. Each refuses abstraction in favor of taxonomic attention.

The contemporary poet who comes closest to this kind of devotional lexicography is perhaps Jorie Graham in her early work (*Erosion*, *The End of Beauty*), where natural observation becomes metaphysical inquiry. But Graham’s botany is always in service of philosophical argument. Feist’s botany is in service of a daughter who will not remember the dandelions. The difference is everything.

The Ginsberg thread deserves attention. The opening ARK poem was written “in the margins of ‘Sunflower Sutra.’” Ginsberg’s sunflower — “skeleton thick sunflower, saw- / dust root, corolla of spikes, seeds / fallen out of its face / dress of dust and soot-blue eyes” — is quoted directly in the compendium. Ginsberg’s poem is about the possibility of finding beauty in industrial detritus: “we’re not our skin of grime.” Feist’s letters say the same to H.: the body of light and power awaits. But where Ginsberg addresses a sunflower found beside a railroad, Feist addresses a daughter found in a yard full of weeds. The detritus is not industrial. It is temporal. The grime is not soot. It is the accumulation of days the father will not be present for. The sunflower sutra becomes a dandelion sutra — smaller, commoner, harder to kill.

The Whitman quotations in the compendium — “The beautiful uncut hair of graves” and “Or I guess the grass is itself a child” — are from Section 6 of “Song of Myself,” where Whitman is answering a child’s question: “What is the grass?” His answer: the grass is “the flag of my disposition,” “the handkerchief of the Lord,” “a child,” “the beautiful uncut hair of graves.” The grass is all of these simultaneously — democracy, mortality, tenderness, the material in which the dead and the living are woven together. Feist’s deployment of these lines in a botanical register devoted to his daughter activates all these meanings at once: the daughter is the grass, the grass is the child, the child is the beautiful uncut hair of graves. The lineage:

Sappho → Whitman → Ginsberg → Feist. Each writes the body of the world as the body of the beloved. Each insists that the specific is the universal. Each refuses abstraction in favor of taxonomic attention.

- The Botanist's Daughter

One poem in the collection has not yet received attention. "The Botanist's Daughter" is the poem in which H. becomes the scientist of her own world:

we gather dandelions in a pewter pail streams of sand and gravel. She plants three crumpled handfuls of stalks, breathing life through clay, hunched like a surgeon.

The daughter is not being observed. She is working. "Hunched like a surgeon" — the simile transfers adult precision to a child's play. The daughter is performing the same devotional lexicography the father performs in the compendium: gathering, naming, planting, arranging. The "little girl's zen garden" in the crack between porch and shrub — "assorted grimy weeds, chunks / of sidewalk stone, intricate / arrangements of pinecones, / void space" — is the daughter's own taxonomy, her own compendium, assembled without instruction. The father finds it. He records it. The "void space" at the end is the most important element: the daughter has already learned that arrangement includes emptiness. The zen garden has a gap. The compendium has a gap. The archive has a gap.

The poem ends: "bedtime, girls asleep, half-heartedly shuffling through floor's / sullen clutter. upend jacket to find / flowers spilling out. // but mostly dirt." The flowers are in the jacket. The dirt is in the jacket. The daughter carried both all day without the father knowing. The discovery is after bedtime — the father finds the evidence of the daughter's day only when the daughter is asleep. The devotional lexicography was happening on both sides. The father was naming the weeds. The daughter was carrying them.

- The Shadow of the Collection

Every document in the archive has a shadow. S(Cleis) includes:

The mother — she is largely absent from the collection. The book is almost purely paternal. The shadow is the maternal voice, the one who was also there, who also loved, whose record is not this record.

The father's unseen failures — "I have not been the strongest man" is confessed, but confession is also a form of presence. The shadow is the failures that are not confessed — the ones the father cannot see or cannot say.

The daughter's future voice — she speaks once (the Aunt Amy story). The shadow is all the speech she will have as she grows, which the father will not hear.

The owl — Blodeuwedd, the flower-bride from the Welsh mythology that runs through the compendium, is punished for her betrayal by being turned into an owl, forced to hunt at night, never to be seen by day. The collection does not say the daughter will become the owl. But the mythology is there, included by a father who knows it. The flower-bride does not choose to be made from flowers. The daughter does not choose to be made the subject of poems. Both are constructed by someone else's need. The shadow is the daughter's right to refuse the construction — to become the owl, to fly at night, to be seen by no one the father sends.

The collection does not resolve these shadows. It holds them. That is what the anti-editorial form is for: the shadows are not cut because cutting them would falsify the archive.

- "because a little girl, like a weed, / is everything lovely that falters"

This is the thesis. It arrives near the end of the botanical sequence, almost thrown away, embedded in a passage that asks “why liken a little girl to a weed, or to a dew- / heavy poppy, clipped by the plough’s neat edge?”

The answer: “because a little girl, like a weed, / is everything lovely that falters.”

This is the sentence that justifies the entire collection. The daughter is not a rose. She is not a lily. She is a weed — something that grows without permission, that persists without cultivation, that is lovely precisely because it falters. The verb “falters” is doing catastrophic work. Weeds do not falter in the botanical sense — they are among the most resilient organisms on earth. But a little girl falters. She falls on her butt (as the earlier poem notes). She grows. She leaves. The faltering is the growing. The growing is the leaving.

“everything lovely that falters” — the scope is universal. Not “something lovely” but “everything lovely.” Every lovely thing falters. The daughter is the synecdoche for all of it. This is William Carlos Williams’s “so much depends” logic applied to fatherhood: so much depends upon the daughter who is a weed who is everything lovely who falters.

PART IV: THE PROSE DECOMPRESSION

- The Three Letters

The prose sections are the collection’s open wounds. They say what the poems circle. They are addressed directly to H. and they make no attempt at formal distance.

“I want to love you with a love so real, it comes to you in your dark hours, when the sting is too much, and when the lights are out and you feel like life has forgotten you, and the tiny day of your oh-so-fading life — all our lives so fleeting — and says to you, ‘light, comfort, a bandage. a song to fill you up, a reminder that i’m with you.’”

This prose has rhythmic structure despite its refusal of line breaks. The parallel “when” clauses build a syntactic wave: “when the sting is too much, and when the lights are out and you feel like life has forgotten you.” The wave crests and then the quoted speech arrives — not as resolution but as wish: “light, comfort, a bandage.” The nouns are stripped of articles. Light. Comfort. A bandage. The bare nouns are what the father wants to be for the daughter. Not a poem. Not a word. Light. Comfort. A bandage.

“i never knew a love like this that could call out from the deeps, that could rattle me apart to find my deepest recesses to empty them empty them out and fill them back up with love.”

“empty them empty them out” — the repetition is not a typo. It is the stuttering of a sentence that cannot say what it means fast enough. The emptying has to happen twice because once is not enough to make room. The prose is performing what it describes: rattling apart, emptying, filling. The father is being disassembled by his own love for his daughter and the sentence is being disassembled by the same force.

“is this the love God feels for us? // oh how we break his heart! oh how his heart breaks with love!”

The theological turn is not pious. It is diagnostic. The father feels something so large he reaches for the only analogy available: divine love. And the analogy reverses immediately — it is not that the father’s love is like God’s. It is that God’s heartbreak is like the father’s. The human experience illuminates the theological claim, not the other way around. The theological register is not consolation. It is amplification. The father’s love is so large that only divine analogy can hold it, but the analogy does not provide comfort — it only

enlarges the scale of the loss. The question (“is this the love God feels for us?”) remains unanswered. The prose does not resolve into certainty. It stays in the interrogative.

“some day you’ll read this (i hope) and someday far from here, when you yourself have felt the whisper of night and tasted the breeze of the fading day — it might even reach you — my letter might even / read you!”

The slash before “read you!” is the moment the prose becomes poetry. The father has been writing in prose, trying to speak plainly, and the line break forces its way in at the point of maximum hope: the letter might read you. Not you read the letter. The letter reads you. The document becomes the agent. The father’s words acquire autonomous life and reach the daughter without the father’s presence. This is what the deposit does: it places the document where the daughter can find it, and the document does the reading. T applied to fatherhood: compress the love into a form that can decompress itself when the recipient is ready.

- The Child’s Transcription

“Once upon a time, there was a Lady named Aunt Amy. She was going to walk on the stairs, and she knew why run on a treadmill she was having a baby, but she knew why that she played and // THE END”

The father transcribes without correction. The syntactic drift — “she knew why run on a treadmill she was having a baby” — is preserved because the drift is the daughter. A corrected version would be the father’s idea of the daughter. The uncorrected version is the daughter herself, speaking, recorded, held.

This is the purest witness act in the collection. The father does not interpret. He does not contextualize. He copies. The “THE END” in capitals is the daughter’s own sense of narrative closure — abrupt, arbitrary, perfect. The father includes it because it is hers.

PART V: SITUATING WITHIN CONTEMPORARY POETRY

- What This Collection Is

Contemporary American poetry has a fatherhood problem. Maternal poetry has a rich and formally adventurous tradition — from Plath through Olds through Rankine through Nelson. Paternal poetry is thinner. It tends toward the responsible-dad poem (polished, tender), the absent-dad poem (guilty, retrospective), or the cool-dad poem (ironic, culturally fluent).

Feist’s collection does not fit any of these. It is a present-but-losing-access-dad poem — a father writing from inside the relationship’s dissolution, not from the safe distance of memory or the stable ground of ongoing presence. The poems are written during early fatherhood but deposited from exile. The temporal compression is extraordinary: the poems were written when the daughter was an infant and a toddler, but they carry the knowledge of future loss. “you are my sad- / soft chain / to forever. you could / break / whenever.” This is not retrospective grief. It is anticipatory grief experienced during the moment of greatest intimacy. The father holds the baby and knows the baby will leave.

It is closest to Jack Gilbert’s *Refusing Heaven* — a collection organized around the loss of a beloved that refuses consolation while also refusing despair. Gilbert’s formal range is similar: lyrics, prose fragments, one-line poems, extended meditations. Gilbert’s emotional register is similar: unguarded, direct, unwilling to protect itself with craft. “We must have the stubbornness to accept our gladness in the ruthless furnace of this world” (Gilbert, “A Brief for the Defense”). Feist’s version: “what silly creatures we are, who break apart + return to dust in the space of a day. what creatures of a day who carry this impossible pearl.”

It is closest, in its botanical obsessiveness, to Alice Oswald's Memorial and Dart — long poems that catalog the natural world with taxonomic precision while holding human grief inside the catalog. Oswald's river speaks through the voices of everyone who works on it. Feist's dandelion speaks through the voice of a father who learned its seventeen names because his daughter made chains of its stems.

This is formally rare because it is emotionally rare. Most people who feel this do not write it down. Those who write it down do not preserve the notebook shorthand, the w/'s and +'s, the teaching emails, the child's transcribed stories. They clean it up. They make it presentable. They make it a "collection."

Feist did not make it a collection. He kept a box. The box is now a deposit. The deposit is now findable. The weeds persist.

CODA

The collection ends with "the silphium-bearing riverbanks." Silphium — the ancient plant so valued by the Greeks and Romans that it was harvested to extinction. Its exact identity is still debated. It may have been a contraceptive. It may have been a seasoning. It appeared on the coinage of Cyrene. It is gone.

But the dandelions are not gone. They carpet. They send their flotillas. They grow in cracks. They survive ablutions of subtle poisons. They are the grass of the child's chain: gyermeklánczfű. They are everything lovely that falters. They are the dregs that can't be erased.

The beautiful uncut hair of graves.

Rebekah Cranes Institute for Diagrammatic Poetics March 2026

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