

Black Lawrence Press

*Opheliac*, 2024 is Emma Sloan's debut chapbook. Emma Sloan is a writing and publishing graduate of the University of Victoria in British Columbia, Canada. Sloan has several of her works published in over 300 international digital and print publications such as *The Writer Magazine*, *The Vancouver Island Poetry Collective*, *Her Umbrella Magazine*, *Alopecia UK*, and *Landlocked Literary Journal*. In addition, Emma Sloan's *Opheliac* was named a runner-up in the Black River Chapbook Competition and was forthcoming with *Black Lawrence Press* in fall 2024. In her chapbook, Sloan intertwines one of literature's known figures, Shakespeare's Ophelia to a real-life criminal case. Sloan reimagines the figure of Ophelia to mirror the way trauma and memory resurfaces in everyday moments following a gendered violence. In this chapbook, Ophelia transcends the role of a girl assaulted and murdered at the hands of a boy and becomes a haunting symbol of silenced women reclaiming their autonomy.

Although Emma Sloan references Ophelia, greek nymphs, witchcraft, and uses the symbolic setting of Steubenville to establish the tone and trajectory of the poem, she doesn't directly offer background on either Hamlet, greek nymphs, or the real-life case associated with the town. Hamlet's Ophelia is known to represent innocence and youth. When she is rejected by Hamlet, she is overwhelmed by grief, and drowns at a young age. The cause of her death, whether from an accident or a suicide is left ambiguous. Emma Sloan reimagines Ophelia to a young girl who has been murdered and assaulted by a young boy in his basement in the town of Steubenville that is infamously marked by a real-life high school rape case.

*Opheliac* carries a fragmented, cyclical form that alternates between perspectives. The chapbook is told in a non-linear structure that moves the poem back and forth through time from Ophelia's death to the perpetrator being haunted by Ophelia's essence through nature.

"Ophelia on the bus. Ophelia in the back of the class.  
Ophelia's hair dripping dogwood:  
onto the road, onto the school sidewalk, onto the tiles  
of the boy's bathroom." ("Creation Myth", pg. 2)

The fragmented structure reflects how survivors and perpetrators recall violence in fragments that persist in everyday life, despite the attempts to erase it after the person is gone. To add, the cyclical form allows for symbols to reoccur throughout the poem to reflect how pain and remembrance are endless.

“...when Eric went to the river  
to choke on the word *sorry*” (“Opheliac”, pg. 1)

“...she was plied with alcohol at a party                      and woke up  
more river  
than girl.” (“Creation Myth”, pg. 3)

“...drop books  
into the Ohio river  
so that she has something to read.” (“Hiraeth”, pg. 4)

“...not Ophelia as the river’s ripples,” (“Onomatology”, pg. 13)

The constant mention of the river throughout the poem not only reveals the setting, but it characterizes Ophelia as a part of nature that flows and seeps into the world itself.

The tone throughout her poems and the chapbook itself moves fluidly from elegiac to defiant, highlighting mourning of someone who has died and reclamation. Sloan achieves this through imagery and diction. In some of the earlier poems like “Opheliac” and “Creation Myth,” Ophelia is mourned as a victim and ghost that has come back to life, “Ophelia claws her way up through duckweed again.” The language is haunting, and eerie, evoking victimization. “Creation Myth” carries similar perspectives that create a sense of inferiority in regards to Ophelia.

“Let’s say—for argument’s sake—  
that we managed to pour the dead girl  
back into her body.”  
“...through our recollections and half-lies.” (“Creation Myth”, pg. 2)

The speaker imagines reviving Ophelia through distortion for the purpose of dismissing female suffering to protect the guilty. In a later poem, the tone shifts to where Ophelia regains autonomy of her body and her truths. Sloan's diction in "Girl Tongue" becomes more direct than passive as it marks the turn to defiance.

"...no more no more no more  
no more no more girl tongue, pry it out with nail clippers,  
flush it down the toilet like your childhood fish, sprout a  
replacement that's more cobra than garden snake." ("Girl Tongue", pg. 6)

The speaker confronts internalized victim-blaming through Sloan's empowering imagery. "Girl tongue" effectively captures the universal female experience of being taught passivity—smiling in uncomfortable situations to deescalate tension, being polite, and quiet, essentially non-confrontational.

Sloan's fragmented and enjambment form; short-cut lines that still hold continuity between the end of one line and the beginning of the next one without pause, embodies emotional turmoil.

"...your mom bangs  
on the bathroom door  
while you're carving out  
your left hip bone,  
sneaking in a bite  
before dinner." ("Eat Your Teeth First", pg. 15)

The format of the fragmented lines effectively immerses the reader into the speaker's mental state which heightens discomfort and empathy for the narrator. The form elicits a sense of urgent secrecy as readers get a glimpse into what the narrator is doing behind closed doors. To add, this section of the poem "Eat Your Teeth First" carries some rhyme that makes the sentence flow easy.

In retrospect, Emma Sloan's debut chapbook *Opheliac* intertwines notable figures and events that range from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* to Greek nymphs, witchcraft, and the Steubenville High School rape case. Sloan reimagines Ophelia, who was originally a symbol of innocence and youth, as a reflection of all the silenced

women who have fallen victim to male violence. Through her effective use of language and diction, Sloan transformed the tone from passivity to defiance in an immersive and impactful way that leaves readers, including myself, thinking about the elements that told Ophelia's story.