

Countess P's Advice for New Girls

by Natasha Trethewey, U.S. Poet Laureate

Look, this is a high class house – polished
Mahogany, potted ferns, rugs two inches thick.
The mirrored parlor multiplies everything –

One glass of champagne is twenty. You'll see
Yourself a hundred times. For our customers
You must learn to be watched. Empty

Your thoughts – think, if you do, only
Of your swelling purse. Hold still as if
You sit for a painting. Catch light

In the hollow of your throat; let shadow dwell
In your navel and beneath the curve
Of your breasts. See yourself through his eyes –

Your neck stretched long and slender, your back
Arched – the awkward poses he might capture
In stone. Let his gaze animate you, then move

As it flatters you most. Wait to be
Asked to speak. Think of yourself as molten glass –
Expand and quiver beneath the weight of his breath.

Don' Pretend you don't know what I mean.
Become what you must. Let him see whatever
He needs. Train yourself not to look back.

Background on this: This is a poem from a collection titled "Bellocq's Ophelia" in which Trethewey writes poems, from the point of view of a fictional character (Ophelia) whom she created based on the images taken by E.J. Bellocq, who documented young girls working in the red light district in early 1900s New Orleans. "Countess P" is the fictional Madame of this brothel.