



LEGENDS REBELLION



LAURA STRICKLING • JOY SCHREIER



"I've spent most of my life perfecting the mechanics of how to sing but, at my heart, I am a storyteller. My heart beats to see eyes in the audience light up when we get to the good part." - Laura Strickling

LEGENDS celebrates women as storytellers and bearers of cultural memory, featuring a wide-ranging collection of songs and song cycles composed since 2011, expanding and enriching the evolving canon of contemporary art song. Our GRAMMY®-nominated debut album began with a single work: Clarice Assad's *Confessions*. Each time we performed it, audience members would ask where they could find a recording. With our directive clear, we began building a collection that represented some of the most compelling voices in modern art song—works by composers and poets that, in many cases, were not yet widely known but deserved a broader audience. Since its release, we've heard from countless performers who have taken up songs from that album, and it means a great deal to know that we may have helped these works find lives beyond us. We believe deeply in the power of live performance, but it exists only in the moment; if you are not there, you miss something that will never happen in exactly the same way again. Recording is our way of holding onto some of that magic – To allow audiences to return to that feeling and examine it; to listen more deeply and ask why these words were chosen, why these stories were told, and how they resonate in their own lives. With **LEGENDS**, we continue the mission of seeking out composers with distinctive musical voices and writers – poets, lyricists, and authors – composing words and stories that need to be heard. These recordings further our ongoing journey of curation, interpretation, and advocacy for music and words of lasting impact. **LEGENDS: Rebellion** is the first installment of this renewed endeavor: a collection of works that challenge silence, resist erasure, question inherited narratives, and insist upon the transformative power of women's voices, stories, and inner lives.

Following the United States' withdrawal from Afghanistan and the return of Taliban rule in 2021, women were once again stripped of positions of leadership, professional careers, and participation in public life. In response to this erasure, composer Juhi Bansal sought a way to amplify the voices of Afghan women through her music. Her discovery of landays, an Afghan poetic tradition built upon two lines, a nine-syllable phrase followed by another of thirteen – shared orally among women, resulted in **Love, Loss, and Exile**, five songs for soprano, cello, and piano. Created and transmitted primarily by women, landays are often acts of quiet protest, Juhi shares, "We don't often think of poetry as rebellion, but the women of Afghanistan have built a tradition out of artistic defiance, of speaking in rhyme words they are forbidden in prose. In the Pashtun culture girls and women share, compose, and speak landays, passed down for generations from woman to woman and tribe to tribe. The anonymous nature of these poems allows them to speak the unspeakable – to talk frankly of sensual love and desire, of yearning to make choices, of girls wanting to be more than an adjunct to their fathers, brothers, and husbands. In a society where young girls are bartered to old men, where to choose where to love is to risk death, where girls are forbidden from education, the landays tell women's stories in their own words, unfiltered and unchecked by the men's voices that surround them." Their anonymity becomes a form of protection and resistance, allowing an unfiltered expression of inner life to survive beyond surveillance and control. Passed from voice to voice, they exist outside systems of control, offering a rare and powerful space for women to speak freely within a deeply restrictive social framework. In light of the 2024 Taliban laws further restricting women's speech outside the home, sharing these texts carries renewed urgency. I lived in Afghanistan from 2011 to 2014, during a period when many women were actively shaping public, cultural, educational, and professional life. Having witnessed firsthand the strength, influence, and complexity of these women's lives, I experience their silencing not as an abstraction, but as a profound loss. What many outsiders first associate with women in Afghanistan—the burqa—is itself a complicated symbol. My friends described it as both a prison and

a source of protection. In Juhi's setting of these short, beautiful, devastating poems, I feel a palpable connection to the women whose lives intersected with mine for a time. My lived experience informs my interpretation, grounding it in empathy. Throughout the cycle, the cello and voice function as both partners and contrasting presences—at times embodying speech, at times transcending it. Bansal's score also incorporates elements of Hindustani timbre, modes, and ornaments, adapted for a Western classical singer, expanding the expressive range of the work. In Love, Loss, and Exile poetry and music form an act of witness – not only to honor these voices, but to carry them forward—ensuring they are heard, felt, and remembered.

1 Love

*Your love is like water, like fire;
The waves engulf me, the flames consume me.*

2 The Stoning Ground

*Mother, come to the prison window
Talk to me before they take me to the stoning ground.*

3 Grief

*If my love dies, let me be his shroud
Together we will wed the dust.*

4 Exile

*I hold a fading flower in my hand
I don't know who to give it to in this strange land.*

5 Tulip

*I'm like a tulip in the desert, I will die before I can open
And the waves of desert wind will scatter my petals.*

To step into the world of **Salt Air** is to enter three distinct, vivid, and disarmingly human interior landscapes. Kalypso and Circe – immortal goddesses – and Penelope, a mortal queen, are not distant figures suspended in epic time; they are present, thinking, waiting, and wanting. Each holds power and vulnerability in uneasy balance, their inner lives shaped as much by longing as by strength. It is this tension – between divine status and deeply human feeling—that continues to make their stories so compelling. Rebellion emerges through reclamation. These women who are so often flattened into archetypes of temptation or patience, are restored to themselves as thinking, desiring, emotionally complex beings. Composer Cecilia Livingston shares that, “*Salt Air* began with *Penelope*, which imagines Penelope (of Homer’s *Odyssey*) wandering the drafty, echoing “empty rooms” of whatever fortress or palace protected and imprisoned her during her long wait for the return of her husband and her son. Penelope is often praised for her loyalty, for being a good wife. But how often do we risk imagining her silent battle against her own mind—against hopelessness? In her day Penelope was just as modern as we are now, so here she sings music that is modern in its hybridity: classical, minimalist, jazz, pop—art song and torch song.” Penelope’s stillness hums with tension; her restraint feels active, even exhausting. becoming its own form of rebellion against the passive ideal history has imposed upon her. Livingston continues, “*Kalypso* takes this approach further to re-imagine coloratura and scat singing through an homage to Harold Arlen’s *Stormy Weather*. Kalypso held Odysseus on her island for years, on his way home from Troy to Ithaca (and to Penelope). There are many musical connections with *Penelope*, particularly in both pieces’ middle sections, which reach for something more bare and visionary as each woman calls out to Odysseus.” Kalypso’s world expands and contracts with longing, her virtuosity never simply decorative but deeply expressive, almost improvisatory in its freedom. After becoming acquainted with Cecilia and sharing a desire to collaborate, she suggested commissioning *Circe* to serve as a bridge between Kalypso and Penelope, expanding the pair into a triptych of interconnected portraits – three women bound by desire, power, and solitude,

illuminating each other’s legends. Livingston says, “*Circe* is loosely inspired by Cy Coleman’s song *Big Spender*. She seduced Odysseus’ crew with song, food, and wine, drugged them to sleep, and turned them into (as American poet John Hollander put it) the animals they always were. In this song—imagined as the toast at the meal with which she ‘welcomes’ the guests she will entrap—we hear what Circe thinks of these men, along with a hint of her own resignation and loneliness.” Perhaps the most outwardly assured, she reveals a sharp wit masking a bitterness that lingers just beneath the surface. Rather than villain, Circe is acutely aware of the systems of power surrounding her, willing to manipulate them before they consume her first. “These three songs suggest parallels between these three women, and each song explores—with a different flavour—a musical language that isn’t quite classical and isn’t quite songbook, and is sometimes a little darker or more strange than we might expect,” says Livingston. Vocally, *Salt Air* asks for a fluidity between styles – classical line, jazz inflection, quick coloratura, interspersed with moments that feel almost spoken. That hybridity allows each woman to exist fully in her own voice. In inhabiting these three worlds I find myself constantly shifting perspective – finding where control yields to vulnerability and beauty gives way to something more raw, always seeking emotional truth of waiting, imagining, and holding onto something, or someone, just out of reach. The quiet rebellions that emerge whenever women refuse to remain myth, symbol, or object and instead claim the fullness of their humanity.

Kalypso

*I don't know why my skin seems thin,
or why I'm tired all the time.
I wish the rain could break this heat;
there's not a cloud left in the sky.
I don't know why I should repeat
this sad old fallacy: somehow
the weather thinks that we should be*

*together; night comes around, but
it's too hot for me to sleep, now
so much of what we had, you took—
took with you, when you went away.
I know I sound—I know I look
like I've got something on my mind;
there's really nothing left to say*

Why Won't You Let Me Look Right At You? enters into a provocative dialogue with Schubert's *Death and the Maiden*, reimagining its familiar narrative through the lens of a striking inversion of power. In Susan Bywaters poem, the maiden shifts from passive victim to active agent, transforming fear into fascination and surrender into desire. Asking a simple but unsettling question: What happens if the maiden is no longer afraid? In Schubert's work, Death appears as both comforter and seducer. Beneath this tenderness, mortality and sensuality intertwine. Ibsen and Bywaters lean into that ambiguity and then reverse it. Here, the maiden does not shrink away textually or musically. She steps forward. She looks. She wants to see Death clearly and perhaps even to meet him on equal ground. The maiden meets Death's gaze directly, her voice charged with a readiness that blurs the line between defiance and longing. Composer Jens Ibsen asks, "What would it be like to be so ready for oblivion as to make Death blush? After all, when it comes to 'little deaths', too, there is an oblivion in giving oneself up wholly to pleasure from another person. I wanted to depict this state of mind, to be yearning and ready for death—whichever death that may be—and the morbid fascination in looking death straight in the eye." Musically, fragments of Schubert's *Death and the Maiden* surface throughout the piece as fleeting echoes. Only at the climax, when Death is finally confronted, does the original melody emerge in full, intensified. In reclaiming the gaze, the maiden transforms fear into agency.

*Hello, speck.
I see you, speck.
Why won't you let me look right at you?*

*You're standing so far from me,
too far away to see.
But you are there, always,
in the corner.*

Why won't you let me look right at you?

*Hello, shadow.
I see you, shadow.
Why won't you let me look right at you?*

*You are facing me, now,
you look at me.
But you will not let me face you,
you always turn away.*

Why won't you let me look right at you?

*Hello, friend.
I see you, friend.
Why won't you let me look right at you?*

*You sit next to me, now,
on the train.
You are in the car next to mine,
there - isn't that you?*

Why won't you let me look right at you?

*Hello, death.
I see you, death.
Why won't you let me look right at you?*

*You make it hard to see, now,
my eyes see only you.
You cloud my vision, dark,
it is only black.*

*Why won't you let me look right at you?
I want to see you now.
I want to see.*

Night-Time in the Fourth Trimester rebels against the polished mythology of motherhood—an unfiltered, darkly comic portrait of exhaustion, rage, devotion, and identity fractured by survival. Set in a single night, the cycle follows a new mother as she tries to settle a restless newborn and reflects on her changing identity, with a heavy side of resentment for the partner who gets to sleep uninterrupted. Before a single note is sung, the score makes its intentions unmistakably clear: “*Break the fourth wall IMMEDIATELY. We have no secrets here and you are basically Pirate Jenny with a diaper genie. Is this cycle a mad scene? YOU TELL ME.*” What follows is a score as imaginative as it is unapologetically unhinged. A fermata is specified as a “*grand pause for extreme side-eye.*” Elsewhere, asked to sing, “*as if surveying a particularly opaque IKEA manual,*” or with “*the utmost beauty and utmost desperation.*” While these notational treasures remain visible only to those holding the score, the performer is commanded into a space that blurs the boundary between performance and confession. Says Caitlin Vincent, “I originally had the idea for this cycle a few weeks after the birth of my first daughter in 2017, but it wasn’t until the birth of my second—three years later—that I finally set pen to paper. Much like the woman in the cycle, I wrote the early sketches of these songs while up in the middle of the night, desperately trying to soothe my baby back to sleep.” Art imitating life, congruently. She continues, “There have been countless songs composed on the topics of love and marriage, but so few about the often brutal reality of what happens *after* the happily-ever-after— from sleepless nights and droopy boobs to the shocking realization that you’ll never be the same person you once were.” Composer Jodi Goble adds that these songs, “take us on an emotional roller-coaster born out of their narrator’s exhaustion: self-deprecating and wry, generously studded with loopy grandiosity, funny and angry and sad and desperate and determinedly cheerful and suffused throughout with love and regret...in short, they practically dare a composer to do them justice. In my musical setting, I aimed for an up-all-night hallucinogenic fugue state — in which anything can be either funny or tragic at a moment’s notice — and tried to make all the corners as sharp as possible; the result is a mad mashup

of styles and textures: Brechtian cabaret, grand waltz, operatic mad scene, military march, fractured mixed-meter lullaby, that can mold itself into whatever the performers want to make of it.” By refusing sentimentality and embracing contradiction, the cycle demonstrates that honesty itself is a radical act. It may come as no surprise that I have sent bootleg performance recordings of this work as tokens of solidarity to friends who are new parents, hoping they may find comfort in its raw humor, along with the assurance that, in my experience, it does (eventually) get better. Or they go to college. Whichever comes first.

I. Welcome

I didn’t want to do this.

So trite.

So predictable.

*A woman, talking to women about
“women’s issues.”*

I didn’t want to do this.

But it’s 2 a.m.

The baby is cluster feeding.

The husband blissfully sleeping.

And I’m here.

Staring, glaring

Into the postpartum void.

...

They lied.

With their “love, then marriage.”

Then “baby in the baby carriage.”

“Happily ever after” as the credits roll.

They never mentioned the doubt.

The depression.

Disconnection from your life before.

From who you were before.

There’s love for the baby.

So much love for the baby.

And so much resentment for him.

Sleeping.

Snoring.

Oblivious.

...

2 a.m.

And I’m here.

In the dark.

Alone.

Feeding this fragile creature.

While I scroll and refresh.

Reposition and compress.

And repress the need to pee.

Welcome to motherhood.

To night-time in the fourth trimester.

II. Breast is Best

They say breast is best.
A test of maternal devotion.
(No pressure. . .
just a measure of your love.)
Breast is best, they say.
And how hard can it be?
Here's your baby.
There's your nipple.
Ready, steady, go – ow!
[spoken; sarcastically]
Have you ever tried wearing nipple
clamps?!
[resume singing]
They say breast is best.
But it's nothing less than a battle.
[as military commander]
Wake up, girls!
3 a.m.
Time to stand at attention.
Remember your training.
Don't let her smell your fear.
Our cause is just!
The fates won't spite us.
As long as we don't get mastitis. . .
There's the baby.
There's your nipple.
Ready, steady. . .
[wincing; muttering]
almost like a mantra]

Breast is best, breast is best, breast is best,
is best, is best, is best. . .
Ow.
[as military commander]
You survived another skirmish
Now set your timer
For a minor top-up in ten.
. . .
They say breast is best.
And maybe they're right.
One day, I'll win the war.
And then cry that it's over.
But now it's 4 a.m.
And the baby just woke up again.

III. I should have worn bikinis

I should have worn bikinis.
When I could.
Short shorts and crop tops.
Halters with too much cleavage.
I should have worn it all.
When I could.
Now it's granny panties.
Sports bras stained with milk.
Eye bags and saddle bags.
A shaky pelvic floor.
I should have worn bikinis.
. . .
And I should have gone to parties.
When I could.

Bar hops and pub crawls.
Dancing and bad decisions.
I should have done it all.
When I could.
Now it's strolling with a stroller.
Falling asleep on the couch.
Playgrounds and playdates.
Endless talk about poo.
I should have gone to parties.
When I could.
. . .
I don't know this body.
This frazzled mom in the mirror.
I don't know this life.
Don't know if I want this life.
I should have worn it, done it, seen it,
tried it all.
When I could.
So I wouldn't want to go back.
If I could.

IV. Please sleep

[sung with the utmost beauty
and utmost desperation]
Please sleep.
You're safe and warm.
Full and loved.
Just close your tiny eyes.
And sleep.
I've changed your diaper.

Changed your clothes.
Sung every song.
Tried every hold.
Rocked and walked.
And every other trick I know.
You're so, so tired.
And I'm so tired.
I'm so tired.
So please, sleep.
Just close your tiny eyes.
And sleep.
Just for an hour or two.
I don't know what else to do.

V. Epilogue

6 a.m.
She's finally down.
Finally sound asleep.
I climb into bed.
Ready to drift away on a cloud of quiet.
But then. . .
But then. . .
He stretches.
He yawns.
Sits up with a smile.
"Good morning!
How did you sleep?"
Morning?!
Morning?!
Good night!

The Original Rebellion is love. A force older than violence, deeper than fear, and more enduring than hate. In November 2024, Jocelyne Jam (@goodthings4blackgirls) shared a spoken word poem that quickly went viral across social media. *The Original Rebellion*, extolling the elemental power of love in opposition to hate, stopped me mid-doom scroll and brought me to tears. I make it a practice to share words of importance, and Jocelyne's words did not simply feel important—they felt urgent. At that same moment, I was in conversation with composer Jasmine Barnes, and we were searching for a text that might spark a new collaboration. Her response to *The Original Rebellion* was as immediate and visceral as my own, so we reached out to Jocelyne and she gave her enthusiastic approval for a song to be composed upon her poem. Jocelyne Jam's text unfolds as a series of quiet but insistent reckonings. It challenges the familiar narratives that elevate rage, cruelty, and dominance as forces of strength, instead revealing their instability—their inability to sustain, to nurture, to endure. Against this, she places love not as something fragile or sentimental, but as a force of profound resilience and power. Tenderness becomes transformative; care becomes vast and immeasurable. Love lifts, labors, persists. It builds, heals, and remains. In Barnes's hands, these words are given added dimension, supported through shifting harmonic tapestries and rhythmic landscapes that underscore both the weight and the radiance of the text. The music does not simply accompany the poem; it breathes and blooms within it, amplifying the urgency of the message. In a world that so often mistakes hardness for strength, *The Original Rebellion* calls us back to something more difficult, more radical, and ultimately more human: To believe in the power of love.

*It is often said that hate burns brighter
but I know that
what burns bright fizzles quick*

*They say rage is power
but I know tenderness can move
mountains
grain by faithful grain*

*They say darkness is deeper
but I've felt the bottomless well
of a mother's care
the endless fathoms of
a friend's forgiveness
I have seen light bust the darkness*

*I have heard it said
that cruelty is more honest,
but truth lives
in the eyes of those who choose
again and again to stay soft*

*They say hate is easier but I
have never seen it rest
Never seen it make a home
Never watched it grow a garden
or build a bridge or heal a wound*

*They say love is weak
But I have heard tales told
of love lifting cars off trapped children
I've seen it work three jobs
Seen it wake up early to make breakfast
Seen it stay up late just to say
goodnight*

*Some say hate is natural
but there is nothing natural
about being the antithesis of yourself
even wolves raise their young
even trees share their sugar
even cells pass nutrients through their
walls*

*There is nothing exotic about poison
and make no mistake, hate is poison
Nothing mysterious about thorns
Nothing sophisticated about shadows*

*Love is the original rebellion
the first light, the older power, the
deepest spell, the truest wild*

Everything else is just pretending



JOY SCHREIER

GRAMMY®-nominated pianist Joy Schreier is a sought-after collaborative pianist and vocal coach. She serves on the music staff of the Washington National Opera and Cathedral Choral Society. Schreier has been presented in recital at Carnegie Hall, Lincoln Center, Merkin Hall, the White House, and the Kennedy Center. Recent performances include recitals with Renée Fleming, Denyce Graves, Lawrence Brownlee, and Pinchas Zukerman. A highly regarded vocal coach, Schreier prepared Ms. Fleming for the world premiere of Kevin Puts' *The Hours* at The Metropolitan Opera, as well as Nixon in China at Opéra National de Paris. She is a former faculty coach at the Peabody Conservatory and regularly coaches for the Cafritz Young Artist Program and the Denyce Graves Foundation. Schreier received wide-spread critical acclaim for *Confessions*, her GRAMMY®-nominated CD release with soprano Laura Strickling. For that release, *Opera News* describes Schreier as a "superbly emotive pianist that wrings every nuance out," while *Schmopera* calls her "an indispensable accompanist...either preternaturally intuitive or possessing perfect communication—perhaps a bit of both." An avid art song recitalist, Schreier serves as official pianist of the Washington International Voice Competition. She received her Doctorate in Collaborative Piano from the Eastman School of Music.

CARRIE BEAN STUTE

Cellist Carrie Bean Stute is co-founder and co-artistic director of the Washington, DC-based Chiarina Chamber Players, a chamber music series and flexible ensemble that has won critical acclaim for its artistry and innovative programming. Chiarina has commissioned such composers as Carlos Simon, Reinaldo Moya, and Jeffrey Mumford, and the ensemble received a Classical Commissioning Grant from Chamber Music America. Carrie's performances are regularly broadcast on Classical WETA's Front Row Washington. In 2025 she released two albums of chamber music: *The Best Cuisine* (Azica Records), featuring chamber music by Carlos Simon, and an album of clarinet trios by Beethoven and Brahms (Centaur Records) with Robert DiLutis and Rita Sloan. Carrie holds degrees from CUNY Graduate Center, Indiana University, and the Eastman School of Music.





LAURA STRICKLING

Two-time GRAMMY® award nominee for Best Classical Vocal Solo Album for 40@40 (2024) and Confessions (2022), soprano Laura Strickling was recognized by The New York Times for her, “flexible voice, crystalline diction, and warm presence.” Celebrated for her work performing and promoting art song, with an emphasis on new additions to the canon through her landmark 40@40 Project song commissioning initiative, she is the host of SongCycle – a podcast covering all things song, curated The NewMusicShelf Soprano Anthology, and has performed recitals and presented masterclasses and lectures with art song and chamber music organizations, music festivals, and universities around the world. She created the roles of Fanni Radnóti in the world premiere of Tom Cipullo’s opera The Parting with Music of Remembrance and the evil Dr. Slade in the serial television-style opera film, Everything for Dawn with Experiments in Opera. Her, “powerful and expressive voice across a large range, her variety of timbre and character,” (Classical Scene), make her a welcome guest soloist for oratorio, concert, and chamber works – from Bach to Britten and beyond. A Chicago native, Ms. Strickling is an avid traveler, having lived in Fez (Morocco), Kabul (Afghanistan), and for the past nine years in the U.S. Virgin Islands. She recently relocated to Wisconsin where she is learning to appreciate cheese, beer, and being cold. www.laurastrickling.com

This album is dedicated with gratitude to Ann Strickling, and to everyone on #teamartsong

The artists gratefully acknowledge the many individuals and organizations whose vision and support brought these songs to life through commissioning, grants, and live premiere performances. The Original Rebellion (Barnes/Jam) was supported by a generous grant from New Music USA's 2026-2027 Creator Fund. Love, Loss, and Exile (Bansal) was commissioned by SongFest and premiered in June 2022 at the San Francisco Conservatory by Abigail Sinclair (soprano), Yu-Hsin Teng (piano), and Evan Kahn (cello). Why won't you look right at me? (Ibsen/Bywaters) was commissioned by and premiered at the São Paulo Contemporary Composers Festival by Chloe Boelter (soprano) and Leandro Roverso (piano) in 2022. Commissioned by American Opera Projects, Kalypso (Livingston) was premiered on May 13, 2016 by Tookah Sapper (soprano) and Kelly Horsted (piano) in New York, NY. Penelope (Livingston) was commissioned by Alexandra Smither (soprano) and received its premiere performance with Suzy Smith (piano) on April 16, 2014 at Walter Hall in Toronto, Canada. Circe (Livingston) was commissioned by Laura Strickling through her 40@40 Project – completing the Salt Air triptych as a complete entity. Laura Strickling and Daniel Schlosberg (piano) premiered Salt Air on January 27, 2025 on LIVE from WFMT in Chicago, IL.

Recorded at Sono Luminus Studios, 9 West Main Street, Boyce VA 22620
7/23-25/2024, 2/18-21/2026, 11/19-22/2026

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Editing Engineers: Daniel Shores & Joshua Frey
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Executive Producer: Laura Strickling, Collin J. Rae



LEGENDS REBELLION

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Love, Loss, and Exile

Juhi Bansal - poems by Anonymous Girls from Afghanistan

1. Love
2. The Stoning Ground
3. Grief
4. Exile
5. Tulips

with Carrie Bean Stute, cello

6-8

Salt Air

Cecilia Livingston - lyrics by Duncan McFarlane & Cecilia Livingston

1. Kalypso
2. Circe
3. Penelope

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Why won't you let me look right at you?

Jens Ibsen - poem by Susan Bywaters

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Night-time in the Fourth Trimester

Jodi Goble - lyrics by Caitlin Vincent

- I. Welcome
- II. Breast is Best
- III. I Should Have Worn Bikinis
- IV. Please Sleep
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The Original Rebellion

Jasmine Arielle Barnes - poem by Jocelyne Jam