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Personal Losses

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The following poems have been previously published:

"The Slow Death of Music in Paris," Poetry Motel

"An Artist's Model in Her Grave," Papyrus

"Rulebreakers Will Be Punished Severely," Branching Out

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Head of the House

Not a breath of cool air moved
when he returned,
entered his home.

Not a sound of him
reached the ears of family,
wife and son.

He might as well be dead,
sitting in his La-Z-Boy
clicking the remote.

Their lives flow on smoothly
without him, heads together, talking,
intimate as lovers

with him in another room.
When he tried to make himself known,
their eyes passed over him, then flicked away,

tactful as if he had farted.
Then they continued talking and
he dissolved into nothing.

Christ on Earth at 2 P.M.

Parking lot sunshine outlines
the edges of the curtain,
touches the much-loved old man,
bound to the antiseptic bed.

Dark medicine drips
into the back of his burning hand.
Glucose sustains him.
Pneumonia is what he has.

He doesn't seek deliverance from pain;
he copes with it.
He's ninety-one and wants to live
to watch SummerSlam '96 on pay-per-view.

Jesus Christ opens the door.
He wears a white lab coat
with His image burned into it
and carries compassionate death.

The living god hears the man's beating heart
and decides to stop it.
It's best for the man, his stupid loving family.
He's ninety-one, he's lived too long, it's time.

New dark medicine enters, kills
through the back of a wrinkled hand
that cannot lift in its own defense
to ward off unwanted mercy.

Fluorescent light bars hiss
at the nurse's station
as the son of God and His pale acolytes
watch. The monitor flatlines.

His hateful family wants him revived. Such a bother
to pretend to try restoring life.
Let his ice floe drift into mist.
Free the bed for someone useful,
young and pretty.

A Samurai Giving Birth to Herself
for Cindy

She must be strong
to bear the knife
cuts in cheekbone, chin, forehead,
her healthy flesh not armor yet,
despised and weak.

She requires
doll-like symmetry
that nature can't create.
It costs a hundred grand
to be ideal,
but nothing's too much to pay
to serve her master.
Samurai get perks:
the need of rich and handsome men,
the envious female gaze.

Many trials must be endured:
breasts sliced open
to take the bags of silicone,
thighs incised
for a vacuum cleaner nozzle, roaring
and ripping yellow fat free
of the body. The trauma can kill,
but the warrior dismisses this known risk
for the chance of perfection.

Her mind must be tough,
her vision clear.
She needs strength to face television cameras,
courage to stand contempt
from the audience who approves the ideal
but hates your bootstrap achievement.

When you achieve perfection,
you are no longer inadequate.
Their daughters peroxide-blond their hair
and can't do algebra,
aspire to Cindy Crawford and Kate Moss,
torture themselves for imperfection.

Before the string of surgeries your doctors/senseis performed,
you were as others are, a woman.
You died to serve your faceless masters,
left a doll in your place
with hard plastic neversag tits
and holes in her feet
that just fit
the spikes in her pedestal.

Tresses

One time I had a man
who wanted me on top
when I kissed him,
my hair falling like water
straight down around our faces.
Loose strands captured themselves
in his beard, for me to pluck free
and toss aside.
He hated the ponytails I wore,
loved my hair loose, called it beautiful
as my breasts when I straddled him.
I wore it down in summer,
sweat soaking its roots
and my skin itching where it touched.
Braced above him, elbows trembling,
I lowered myself, did all the work.
He needed someone hardier--
my hair wasn't gold and
my arms not strong enough
to pull him into my tower.
When he left me, I went to the hairdresser
and remembered the scent of him
as I sat there, breathing in
the chemical marriage of hairspray and ammonia,
and gave my hair to the shears.

The Slow Death of Music in Paris

Are you alive somewhere, in Africa?
The idea that you have abandoned this planet
The world cannot believe; it needs you still.
Even the new creatures who deride you as a poseur,
No poet, yesterday's news,
Cannot let go. Witness the
Time cover: "He's Hot, He's Sexy, He's Dead."
Even damned as a posturing overrated pseudo-rebel,
The Pig Man of L.A.,
You must live somewhere on this earth.

Sad to imagine your dreams vain pretensions.
You cried, but who cares about the tears
Wept by someone who's out of style?
Did they think you couldn't read insults, couldn't hear,
couldn't care?
Pain dissolves in sex and sloe gin, your sacraments.
In Paris you replay your ritual chants
Until your heart pounds in time to them,
Their beats ice pick stabs.
Adoring masses now worship other gods;
Your acolytes are gone

Except one Maenad, entranced,
Or are you the worshipper now?
She hides her Atropos face behind strawberry-blond freckles
And administers her own opium poppy sacrament.
A fountain of sacrifice, scarlet life spewing
From your lips into the white enamel chalice
The life-cutter holds to contain you.
Drink of Dionysus; this is my blood.
Tear my limbs asunder and eat; this is my flesh.
Did you wish it this way?
Your Olympian throne a clawfooted bathtub,
A ritual cleansing with tepid pink water.
Did you howl, protesting, Atropos unmoved,
Sinking into the death-bringing sleep?

You have gone, but
The necrophile packs you in ice, holds you in her bed,
Then abandons you in the ancient bonedirt of Paris.
Alone, but for the laments of the true Maenads,
Your living voice is silent; you cannot sing now in our stead.
Dionysus is dead.

Skinning Myself

The piece of damaged flesh is holey,
a scrap of tissue-paper lace,
clinging tight to my fingers.

I must be losing cohesion,
shedding, peeling
away like water-stained wallpaper.

Strips of me fall onto the floor.
My red-burned arms writhe there until
the sun transforms me to a snake.

I have no eggs to hatch,
so I create a twin from dead skin,
a cold birth.

I wish for cobra-ness,
to be some deadly thing best left alone,
a glint of fangs in tall green grass,

a trap for a careless fool.
I slither away, tasting poison,
my belly full.

Carnivores

They're having me for dinner,
but it's not ready yet.
I prowls around their living room, noticing
they keep their trophies on the mantelpiece:
bowling, basketball,
a dumb blonde in a prom dress, dessicated,
their son triumphant just before the kill.
Now their son belongs to me.
Now I become fresh meat.

We surround the table,
snatching overloaded bowls and plates.
His mother cooked it all,
a bleached blonde alpha wolf,
leader of the clan.

Pink flakes of ham float in
the cheese-drenched macaroni,
adhering to noodles like skin.
Nothing for a harmless herbivore to eat,
but salad and the bread.

My boyfriend's niece sticks me on the griddle.
"What do you eat?"
she asks, with casual contempt.
I know they feel the same.
Why bother explaining?
I'm different from them, separate and wrong.
Wrongness signals prey.

But who puts ham into a meatless dish,
knowing a guest can't eat it?
Meals and meals stretch out
into the future, teaching me
of the pack, who destroy
flesh with ripping teeth
that scar the bone
as I graze on lettuce leaves
and they squabble over carcasses.

Framed Photographs

Children under glass
smile from a desktop,
their lives sectioned like a fryer--
drumstick, breast, wing.
The boy and girl are together just once
as babies in bright colors, smiling,
drooling on toys.

At junior high graduation
she holds the cheap blue sateen hem
carefully above her ankles,
wobbly in unfamiliar heels.
She smiles big,
smiles big again at

Homecoming:
displaying every tooth at once,
awkward in strapless bodice and puffy 1980's skirt.
Her corsage is too fat for her thin wrist.

Then the prom:
her smile toned down, assured,
eyes aware now,
a hand on one hip,
young woman in magenta sequins and
a slit skirt.

The boy has one
high school class picture
in his sister's gallery.
He has a calm-eyed placid face.
Did he disappoint somehow,
drift into marriage with an accidentally pregnant girl,
drop out to race cars
or fix them?
Did he die,
cut to shreds by thirteen-year-olds
wielding Uzis,
crash a car in a dark liquor haze,
or quiet cocaine intoxication?
His bodiless head
is an outcropping of rock
in his sister's sea of color.

An Artist's Model in Her Grave

Flat on my back like drowning Ophelia,
whom I spent three days imitating in
water the artist allowed to cool while
mesmerized by paint on nubby canvas,
thick, vivid, the smell stinging his nostrils
while I caught pneumonia in his bathtub.
My father sued the man for fifty pounds.
I didn't die, then. I met my husband.

All blood and bone, I wasted, ladylike,
paradigm of Victorian woman.
Luckless, I drowned myself in laudanum.
Posthumous, I was Dante's Beatrice,
a saint in paint, immortal, but in life
a common whore claimed my place in your bed,
usurped your love. I remember her name.
Faithless husband, I always knew their names.

Still your book of poems lies in my hands,
where you placed it half a decade ago.
So many years you have been lost to me,
only this notebook left for me to read.
Its edges catch long silky strands and pull,
inflicting pain, singing of other loves.
These spirit-sluts trouble my death-drugged sleep;
at least they are locked in with me, silenced.

The light! It's impossible; is it you?
My angel husband, come to lift me up?
No, just your friends, not you, looking at me
and the silken lining of my coffin,
my eternally growing hellfire hair.
Ungentle hands rip your book from my grasp,
stealing evidence of vanished loving,
robbing me of a last glimpse of your face.

Stop

I was alone in the bowels of the desert,
naturally,
when the warning light brightened.
LIFE LIFE LIFE
in steady red.
The disembodied voice informed me,
"You're low on life. Refuel at once."
Of course there wasn't a station in sight,
just air and cactus,
so I kept going,
watching the needle dip past E
and sensing everything
bleeding away
 asphalt highway stretching ahead
 seas of desert edging it
 pinon pines here and there
 washed-out sky
to nothing.
When a station finally emerged
from the roadside sand,
chrome dustied from its recent birth,
I coasted in on fumes.
Before refueling I remembered to
check my wallet.
Empty. I might have known.
So I moved along.
Maybe I can get to hell
on what's left.

Testimony of Dead Branches

They bury the misfits
under flat tombstones
so they can't pop up and deface
other people's obituaries.

Sometimes their stones get sodded over;
rain drives mud over them,
wind blows grass seed and
they vanish.

On the family tree
they don't amount to much, either,
just stubby shoots
that wither in a generation.

Pictures of Eliza show
a hat pulled down to her eyes, a heavy coat,
and Chicago brownstones.
Her husband remarried after she died.

Imogene Rose, beloved daughter,
was buried next to her mother.
July-November 1926;
the influenza got her.

Eliza and the husband didn't believe in doctors--
couldn't afford one--
so she held the baby next to her in the iron bed,
trying to warm her.

Two years later, Eliza
took to her bed again, alone,
and never rose.
She wore out and gave up.

They lie at Pleasant Grove,
husband and father buried miles away
under a single headstone with his other wife,
and their graves go untended.

Bermuda Triangle

God is a mother, jealous and possessive,
gathering in her children whenever she can
from destroyers and pleasure boats with bright sails.
Captain Stubing can't save them from her bosom
of lightless cold.

God is a lover, lusting for World War II fighters,
stealing Audie Murphy wannabes and their planes from the sky.
American, Japanese, she plays no favorites.
As her tendrils of seaweed pluck them from the world,
bureaucrats bemoan the men and materiel lost.

God is a virgin, seeking companionship with
the mortals who people her hidden palace,
those whose lungs marinate in brine and
whose eyes bulge opaque from their faces, straining,
blind from their glimpse of the real.

God is a crone, sterile, annihilating the
hated tourists who darken her domain,
erasing them with waterspouts towering hundreds of feet
above,
with tsunamis that obliterate and
holes plunging to the bottom of the ocean,
the death canal.

Necropolis

Cats roam the city's hallowed dirt tracks,
Narrow-pupiled eyes glowing with wisdom
Pilfered from rank flesh and sweet marrow.
Its dark shine irradiates the city of stone.
They sit, complacent.
They stalk, well-fed.

A pilgrim wanders the city's paths of earth,
Her shoes cast off on the dusty long grass.
She walks the sacred ways on bare feet,
Their prints disappearing in the distance.
She searches, bereft.
She stares, lost-eyed.

He lies still in his cramped home,
Oblivious to her otherworldly footsteps above.
His mind no longer moves in the city's wood and metal
housing.
He rests, stately.
He reclines, dead-bodied.

Rulebreakers Will Be Punished Severely

Vulnerable in nakedness,
warm rain falls on us
from the showerhead.
We're veiled from consequence by
colorless distorting plastic and
blue palm fronds.
Water studs our skin like sequins,
beads crystal in hair and on eyelashes.
I slide down your body, liquid,
as my cheek passes over chest and belly,
coming to rest against a muscled thigh.
Your pleasure makes me smile, but
even as you surrender yourself to me with closed eyes and
a hesitant hand in my hair,
I know you'll make me sorry.
Even as you gasp and your legs tremble,
I know I'm breaking your rules,
moving too fast for you,
losing your esteem.
I wish the future hazier
than this shower curtain.
A whispered "Oh my god" escapes
your parted lips,
a breath, then my name.
In six months
or six weeks
six days
six hours
the magic wand between your thighs
will transform me
from something desired
into something discarded,
a scrap of spoiled food,
a crushed soda can.

Regrets from a Love Suicide

Before God, I wish I could kill your heart,
Turn it to black rot in your stony chest,
Repay you for my pain, at least in part.

I never had a map or any chart
Of your sea-hidden reefs. I only guessed.
Before God, I wish I could kill your heart.

How could our love's voyage properly start
When your heart never burned? How can I best
Repay you for my pain, at least in part?

Do you recall our parting on St. Bart's?
Resplendent in pain, I was fancy-dressed
Before God. I wish I could kill your heart

As you killed mine, your work of finest art.
Until I make you hurt I cannot rest,
Repay you for my pain, at least in part.

The ocean fills the lungs of this dumb tart,
Her skin now cold and numb to your caress.
Before God, I wish I could kill your heart,
Repay you for my pain, at least in part.

The Amusement Park

He had a good time;
that's what she was there for.
He paid--
 rosebuds, pulled-out chairs, lying "I love you's"--
and then enjoyed rollercoaster
wind in his face,
admired the midway's neon shine
when it reflected well on him.
He played games,
points easily scored
with rebukes:
Bullseye!
Before long amusement palled.
His eyes fastened onto the burned-out bulbs
of the merry-go-round;
the music of the midway offended.
So he turned and slipped away into the darkness
behind the cotton-candy booth
with no more thought of her
than of candy wrappers and corn dog sticks,
his other leftovers.

Screen

An expert at giving Indian burns in kindergarten,
you terrorized the playground at recess.
The teachers seemed to look past you
as if you radiated a force field that
deflected their gazes
as they searched for the little girl
who made other little girls cry.

Making out in the back seats
of countless 1970's cars,
you never fumbled
behind windows opaque with steam,
smooth with other girls's boyfriends.
Your hands and mouth erased
visions of them from male minds,
like shaking an Etch-a-Sketch.

It surprised nobody when
you sat in your boyfriend's trailer
beside your ten-year-old daughter,
eyes fixed on the TV,
its picture bled red, sound blasting out.
He murdered his seventeen-year-old lover in the next room
but you said you heard nothing,
no dragging, no bumps transmitted through the floor as
the show segued to a commercial for smoke detectors, and
your lover rolled the fresh corpse into a bonfire in the
backyard, and
you watched the screen.

Dying Spring

You died; no way to make it pretty,
excuse it as an act of nature.
Flowers wither and die with the cold
and reincarnate in spring.
We don't have their roots to earth;
our feet can run.
Illness rooted you in disinfected tile,
the coarseness of Lysol-smelling sheets,
and bedrails cold as Christmas to fence you in.
Flexible plastic tubes extended from you,
delivered nourishment;
tough fibers transmitted
impulses to faraway monitors.
They grew out of you, like fingers,
but they failed to save you.
You died; the doctors gave you back to me
to plant in the ground.

Mountain Meadows

The pale sky dazzles today
in this place, Mountain Meadows.
Guns speak of their owners hating
the falling women and children.

In this place, Mountain Meadows,
God's face reveals itself as
the falling women and children
see visions of holy murderers.

God's face reveals itself as
Brigham Young, the patriarch, who
sees visions of holy murderers
and recreates his chosen people.

Brigham Young, the patriarch, who
in a birthing of blood and gunpowder
recreates his chosen people,
their hearts pumping poison.

Into a birthing of blood and gunpowder
the Fancher train arrives.
Their hearts pumping poison,
the Mormons look, silent, planning.

The Fancher train arrives
across the salt desert from Arkansas.
The Mormons look, planning
in the name of God.

Across the salt desert from Arkansas,
pioneers plead for bread, salt pork, water.
In the name of God
the Saints deny food to thin-faced infidels.

The pioneers plead for bread, salt pork, water
from those who would offer them in sacrifice.
The Saints deny food to thin-faced infidels
because they killed the Prophet.

From those who would offer them in sacrifice
they tried to flee across the mountains.
Because they killed the Prophet,
they were stalked like deer.

They tried to flee across the mountains,
camping at a place called Mountain Meadows.

They were stalked like deer
as the godly watched from concealment.

Camping at a place called Mountain Meadows,
they were attacked with fiery arrows and guns
as the godly watched from concealment.
The slaughter commenced.

They were attacked with fiery arrows and guns
as the Mormons had arranged beforehand.
The slaughter commenced
with the disarming of their fighters.

As the Mormons had arranged beforehand,
gentile bodies ripped apart
with the disarming of their fighters.
Blood splatters rock and sand.

Gentile bodies ripped apart.
Guns speak of their owners hating.
Blood splatters rock and sand.
The pale sky dazzles today.

Interior Landscape

My world is beige and brown and gold,
like Dorothy's sepia Kansas;
I've never seen an Oz.
Its grass is long and withered, dry,
moving with the wind
in a zombie parody of life,
too brittle for a mattress, but it serves
and I lie here, still and staring.

The house atop the hill is black at noon,
generates its own shadows
against the faded sky.
The barn gapes, filled with cavities,
while a shirt flaps ghostly arms,
prisoner of the clothesline.
It may warn--GET OUT--
or greet--COME HOME.
Its short-mowed boundary
sweeps in an arc toward me,
a blast wave.

I'm already damaged, though,
snaking through the rough,
legs dragging thin and pretty,
useless in sensible shoes.
Fake cottonflesh sticks
in the heat of the sun,
becomes new skin, while
a black lizard bites his tail,
encircling my waist.

I'm returning from the cemetery.
Such an effort.
My dark hair escapes its bun,
sticks out, fluttering.
Witch's loops, they're called.
I wish that I had stayed among the graves,
with Ma and Pa and numerous nameless babes,
become fleshdust ready to blow away
with the first wind, like Oklahoma soil,
not struggled to return
through the grass to the edge of my world,
to end here lying flat, panting still.
I should have turned to bone.