

The fruit and the flesh:
A collection of poetry

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For my mother, from whom I inherited a love of language,
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I. The Burden

The story begins

Twin grubs crawl in darkness,
Single-celled and thoughtless.
Call one Eve, dust shaken from the moon of His finger.
The other, Adam, though they are blind to distinction.
They are not hungry. They do not want.

They are boring.
The finger flicks off another worm,
lets it tumble into his simple diorama.
This worm knows rejection, loves the loss
God taught him.

He keeps himself company,
dividing into a thousand tiny voices shouting
that the space between two bodies
is called Emptiness.

His breath makes them dance,
plows them in a rhythmic writhe
against each other.
They gnaw at the void,
consume and crave each other.

The creator and his brother watch
the mouths swallow complexity,
spit out children that grow distant.
They watch them weaken,
feeding on their need.

God commissions a Christ

Make me a puppet
from mortal fabric,
skin and sinew.
Find the needle, fly the shuttle.
Before the cock crows,
follow humanity's pattern.
Preserve imperfection,
a weave to hide our angles.
Strip him of stuffing,
let ribs puff him up.
But leave his heart:
its grip will humble him.

Immaculata

Virgin, this is science:
A worm invades an egg,
any one will do.

The worms race to feed,
all save one will die, the odds against them.
but there is magic in this maggot.

At once,
the cell will divide.
It will cleave worlds within your womb.

An ordinary miracle,
there is blood.
Where is the doctor?

Woman, you are poor.
You birth a boy into waste,
call him divine.

Pry the child
from the belly of a girl.
His burden is too great.

Somebody else's baby

Each month she swells,
occupied by a stranger.
She is unrecognizable.

Each night, he builds a crib for the child.
He works till dawn, works till she wakes,
weaving hewn fir into a basket.

He wishes to please her.
He pictures her pretty round face
smiling at his gift.

At once, he destroys it.
He breaks its spindly legs,
hacks at its smoothed ribs,
crushes the knobs he made, the knuckles.

What child is this?
Or whose?

Jesus is condemned to birth

Birther screaming,
calving and keening,
Beautiful, crying baby,
you are cold.
you are hungry.
You are helpless.

You are not born knowing how to be happy,
not born knowing why you are here,
knowing where you will go,
when you must stop,
not born knowing what you are,
knowing who your father is.
Not born.

They will tell you, and
live through you,
then condemn you,
die through you.

They will take everything.
For now, you are only a name.

Judas

Wait for night
at Gethsemane, the Garden.
For the tender, a kiss:
he'll be known by this.

Jealous of the others—fools.
John was the one Jesus loved,
Peter the leader,
the twins of thunder, the brothers of brashness.

The treasurer took Caesar's coins,
traitor taking the betrayed,
took the cup in his hands
and drank to seal the pact.

His leader, the prophet, the anointed one
saw it—knew what he would choose
and let him go, gave him freedom,
knew his mind would maim him later.

His master took the cup too,
sealed a pact of his own,
his death wish, life sentence,
needed the destruction of his friend:

The weak one, the human, the hero.
It would be better for that man
if he had never been born.

Pontius Pilate

The perfect prefect rose,
drove the articulations of his fingers
as he sat up from his intricate wood-carved seat,
the perch of power, the judgment stump.

He counted his footsteps—seven, a holy number,
And looked out onto thousands of faces,
so many they could not be counted,
though he had tried.

Speaking slowly, searching for syllabic symmetry,
said, I am clean, clean, clean, clean of what?
Felt his tongue slap his hard palate, touch his cuspids.

Raised his hands, red and raw,
the useless knobs scrubbed fleshy
to dislodge the stains lurking in the creases.

He dipped them three times, and a fingertip more,
half the perfect number, in the bowl,
held the ritual in his hands.

Scrubbed and scratched them,
like a serpent surrendering his skin,
leaving only a shadow of his life.

The cross

Two unhappy trees
bend at the waist,
they are matted,
bough touches bough,
branches like gnarled fingers grasping.
They are landmarks for the lost,
who will pass and reflect on their loneliness.

Violence will come for them,
hacking into their sides,
separating the trunks, gasping,
that grew up and into each other.

From their bark,
the killer, the maker,
will mold them dead.
Supplicants, supine, splintered.
Mitred, tidy and uncomplicated,
heavy with hollowness,
dead to hold the dying.

The lumber butcher takes a cloth,
it licks the saw.
The scent of sap clutches the blade.

Jesus meets his mother

She leads with her womb,
a mass of tissue, ever sterile
by the work of God.

By now she is old,
her life plotted out
by what has been written.

Today, she is told to watch him die,
the middle crucifixion in a cove of three.
It will take hours.

Chips from the rough wood needle his back,
his hair is matted, swaying with sweat,
the smell of urine clings to his leg,
the sockets in his hands whistle,
screaming wide around the nails that hang them.

She wants to hold her flesh in her lap,
close as a pregnancy.
She wants to understand him move.

The woman

He told me not to cry.
He told me he would wait for me,
that he would be waiting there.
I didn't ask him where there was.
I knew it didn't matter.

I watched him go.
I had watched him leave a hundred times,
Did he think of me?
Was his love less than before?
He always came back tired.

One day, I followed him.
I stopped among a crowd.
There was a man, a criminal, the woman beside me whispered.
Some man, they laughed, some god.
They would kill him for sport.

Screened by limbs,
this was no man,
this was him.
I had followed him here.

He was a man of parts.
I wiped his sweat his face his blood on my cloth.
Those things I could keep.

Interview with the bereaved

We met in an inn. We didn't have much time.
The room was hot and we were half-naked.
We could afford a single candle. I felt for his outlines.
Dust shaken from the sheet clung to our skin.

Afterward, he told me he wasn't made for any woman—
he said he was not made for me.
I told him I didn't understand,
He said he knew I wouldn't.

He told me that terrible things would happen.
He said he wanted to protect me.
We said goodbye before we had to.

I do not know if he missed me.
He didn't tell me he was coming.
I was working when he entered—

Shaking, I broke the bottle in my hand,
poured perfume on his feet.
I craved his touch. I embraced his feet with my hands and hair.
He looked down at me, his brown eyes empty.
For the first time, I felt unworthy.

The others mocked me,
my patron raged.
And he—he pretended that I was some stranger.
He made a parable out of me.

But you asked about the last time.
It was three days after he died.
I saw him—I swear I did.
Standing outside his tomb.
He made his religion out of me.

II. Rules for Remembering

Catholics in Marion, NC, 1969

Every Sunday from 10 to noon
their house became a church, their chimney a steeple.
They heard confession in the dining room,
prepared the body of Christ in the garage,
received the wafer in the den, like
practitioners of some suburban cult.

They stuck out their tongues
to taste Jesus,
as an elderly pianist played old hymns
and swore when she missed a note,
while the molting fur on her shoulder
stared ruefully out at them.

The eldest boys served the altar,
a little buzzed from their makeshift miracle
turning wine to water.
Those who took the cup
tasted the larceny
and found it good.

Marriage

My mother's ring is etched with a wish for others,
whom death has parted and rejoined:
JOHN AND MARY FOREVER.

Too poor to propose,
my father and mother vowed themselves to each other
before God, a justice, and her parents.

My father's parents were absent—
the evidence of marriage hidden.
I have hunted it, worried their marriage was not real,
seeking reason to justify rebellion.

There are no pictures, I will not inherit a dress.
The certificate cannot be found.
They did not celebrate a sacrament,
keeping nothing but the ceremony in their souls.

The missing became the most important guest.
My grandparents said he had made a terrible mistake.
They were young. She was Catholic. It was wrong.

When I was nine, he took the vow of Ruth:
Where you go I will go,
And your people will be my people
and your God, my God.
I am tired of being left out.

The Patricia Poems

My mother's sister died at the age of three,
forgotten for hours on a hospital gurney.

1. Waiting

How long Patricia waited in that hallway,
tubes up her tiny nostrils,
her hair a tangle of curls,
eating ether.

How long she craved ice cream,
cradled in iron,
before a sister clung to her mother's womb,
suckling sorrow.

How long they waited for the priest
to christen her head with oil,
to deliver the last sacrament so close to the first.
She was three—she had never not been perfect.

How long her mother rehearsed this eulogy,
summoned smiles, aching to shut out
the people who had come
to mourn and gawk.

How long that holy visitor attended her,
two mothers who had watched while their children withered.
How long until she looked up from her silent crying,
her makeup unsmudged.

How long until words came:
Is she with you?
How long until she told her husband
that the visitor nodded, that they could live on.
How long she carried that absent child.

The Patricia Poems

2. Calling

She listened as the rotary whirred seven times,
humming at a convent in Camden.
with her other hand,
she tightened her apron,
smoothing the grease-mottled flowers
around her hips.
Her sister answered the phone,
calling to their third.
They had not spoken in three years, since the Baptism.
The burial will be Friday.
You can stay here, with us.
We have a spare room.
The toast popped up, burnt.
She raised a knife to it, shaved off its scabs
And called her husband to breakfast.

The Patricia Poems

3. Rules for Remembering

The first telling must be real and told humorously.
From that point, one may embellish as needed,
to prevent the same story from becoming boring if re-heard.

The occasion is Christmas; the main event is story-telling,
dressing the carcass of their recollections as they cook and clean,
scrubbing at the grease left behind by the turkey.
But always, if pressed, they can recall where the bones are.

The winner should be the eldest, the one who had
the mother who made her scrub the floors each day
(despite their housekeeper, and her still-perfect nailbeds);
and grew up in a house that was a former gas station, where
at midnight, travelers would knock, demanding fuel.
And had a pet spider monkey, tormented once too much by curious fingers,
and disabled a humidifier and committed suicide by fan.

But the others remember none of these things.
She has broken the only rule,
betrayed the family and truth,
For that, she is unequivocally disqualified.

Perhaps she doesn't remember the truth anymore.
Perhaps her escapes make her just the most absurd in a family that loves a good story.
Perhaps the worst of them substitute for facts too painful to recall.

The only one who remembers the sister who died,
the sister who never came home to play,
the sister whom she missed, remembered, and could not speak of.
The sister who would always hold her parents.

Perhaps her truth is different.

The Patricia Poems

4. Dying

She held the name decades
inside her mouth,
releasing it only to say,
Don't name your daughter Patricia.
Don't call your son Patrick.
The name died young.

In a small notebook by the bed,
resting on a lace doily,
she recorded her memories, wrote questions.
Sometimes, she would write letters to her grandson,
inventing some terrible quarrel.
For every creation, there was a memory lost.
Why am I here? Whose bed is this?
Where is John? Where is my daughter?

She fell without crying out.
In the next room,
my mother continued drinking her coffee,
as she laid out on the floor,
growing cold as the tile.

Litany of Liquor

In my parents' house,
you won't find
vodka
or rum
or beer
or the alcohol
that plied the personality
of her youth.
There isn't
whiskey or gin, and
the ales and aches of yesterday
are absent,
except in a small corner
of their chest.
My inheritance.

III. The Missing

Grief

She smelled like yesterday.
A yesterday; the yesterday.
Moments sighing into each other,
leaking into her bones,
and filling all the empty spaces
to measure the hollowness.

She smelled dirty,
like tears, like coffee drunk too early.
That was how she smelled, exactly,
because it's untrue to find metaphor
in blank eyes, cold small hands, a paused video game.
There is none.

She smelled like dirt,
dirt from the grave.
Dirt from collapsing onto the lawn,
shaking his skinny body,
breathing into his foaming mute mouth,
listening to his heart stop.

Today, her sister glides around the house,
making sandwiches no one can eat.
Her son, the one left,
lies on the floor,
beside his brother's empty bed.

**Failed jeremiad for J,
1995-2008**

Put away your love,
study the earth's fresh cradle.

Let your hands be still,
empty your fingers from grieving.

Over the casket,
place dirt, clumps of yesterday.

Hushed, little Jacob.

Questions at age 12 and 21

How do I know there is a God?
Why did God need a son?
Why did he not choose a daughter?

Why did he use an ordinary woman to have a son?
Did he have sex with her?
What is virginity?

Was Jesus a virgin?
Did Jesus ever marry?
Did he ever fall in love?

Why did God kill his son?
What if God had other sons?
Why was Jesus afraid?

Why did Jesus's friend betray him?
Will my friends betray me?

What if Jesus messed up?
How do I know Heaven exists?
What if I messed up too much to go?

Why did his son say he was forsaken?
Why am I forsaken?

When will I die?
What will happen when I die?
Why does God need me?

Sitting at Mass

Everything here is fake.

There are thumbprints on the chalice,
which is filled with wine,
and maybe if I had more I'd believe this.

I think of the pope, squatting under his pointed fabric crown,
listening to the Gospel according to Luke
(be on my mind, upon my lips, and in my heart):

“Beware of false prophets,
who come to you in sheep’s clothing,
but underneath are ravenous wolves.”

In his homily, the man who lacks
wife and children and sex
and job like mine and apparently sin, says:

“Live like good fruit, that will be plucked by God
rather than fall, rotten, to the earth.”

We pretend gluttony got us into this mess.
Now we are the fruit, we become the sin we consume.
We repeat that we are unworthy.

We sing practiced praise—god, that woman sings so loudly,
I don’t want to hold her hand, or shake it,
because I just saw her cough into it.

On this table, the altar burning with incense
so pungent it makes my eyes water,
we prepare a feast of flesh.

But we have no meat here,
nothing to fatten our lonely bones.
We have only these cardboard wafers and boxed wine.

After church, I go home hungry.

Communion

Kneel at his feet, the one who
bleeds and sweats and howls,
in buckets capture the waste from his wounds.
Drink in memory.

The man is gone, unseen.
His draught is open, unholy,
poured into plastic.
Drink, to forget.

Gulp the ripeness and the rust of it,
the fruit and the flesh in it.

Forgiveness

You will be immortal.
Called out of darkness,
I name you Misery.

Tattooed in voodoo,
Skin grafted from those you sinned against.
Brows scorched,
angry blisters for eyes,
spitting disease,
the mouth a scabbard for your tongue.

You will be kneeless for the girl
who could not walk alone after you,
fingerless for the drinks you blamed,

You will have cancer,
a tumor will grow uncontrollably,
like your child in her womb.

You will keep your spine,
it will hold you up,
but be burdened by her body's weight.

You will walk with a crutch.
Meet the scars-covered shaman,
the man curtained
to shield your shame.
He will inspect your injuries.

Let your symptoms scream.
"Help me heal.
I'll pay you."

On the Death of Mary Daly, Jan. 3, 2010

I'm from the second sex,
carved from rib, a boomerang,
wings sharpened on sin
I'm not coming back.

I'm in the habit of mourning,
crying at your cardinals who cast me out,
show me castrated,
their plumes not made for mates.

You made us both,
needed me for future him.
Now I'm a siren, a seducer,
not worthy to receive you,
a woman waiting at the gates.

What he is not

Not man, or beast, or noun,
Not matter not form not parts
Not mortal, not immortal, eternal,
Not substance, not metaphor.

Not moving but moving others
Intangible, touching all
Not the beginning or the end, but infinite,
Not felt, but omnipotent.

Nothing, but in everything,
Not divided but made of three,
Immutable, as else changes,
Human and ghost and divine.

Genderless, but Father,
Passionless, but inspiring faith
Known to man, and yet unknown,
Not named, not belonging, not beholden.

Not these words.

Centó from Psalms

The nations have fallen into the pit they have dug
Their throat is an open grave;
The cords of death entangled me.

I lie down and sleep
and drench my couch with tears.
I am poured out like water.

Answer me when I call to you,
Do not drag me away with the wicked.
Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?

How then can you say to me:
Wait for the LORD.

Creation

History hides in the sheets,
bed of the universe,
fistfuls of air that bang together
hanging cumulus of sweat
above two bodies.

There is no room here for why.
There is science to explain wanting.

Above our bodies,
the stale air fogs the room
after our collision
in this ordinary bed
I want to hide with you here.

Whatever brought me, brought you.