

Sarah Lilius

&

Erin M. Bertram

A Collection of Exquisite Corpses

[Yesterday you met]

Yesterday you met
your older self & talked
about growing old.

Nothing new
here, except this time
your nails were

long & the tongue
you spoke in
was exquisite done

over. Your mouth
did not realize how
words

really
sound when you're
in solid pain.

A muted
trumpet, crickets
in a field by the thousands.

Between your two
hands lies the world.
Rattle it around a

little, roll it slick between
forefinger &
thumb. Let the fragile

waters wash over
your shaking hands.
Discharge

silence. Relive
your past in
ten minutes.

And tell no one
what you've
done. The blood. The

slow way you
change.
Tell no one of the

sorrow spindled
out of control,
out of reality.

When the freeway rises to
meet the line drawn
down the center of your heart,

straddle something, call it *lover*.
And when the sun

rises, let go.

[The strange moan of our existence]

The strange moan of our existence
keeps me breathing as if underwater, I rock in the silences, plow
through this fallow field of rashes & the next

glimmering disaster. You're not crazy, she said,
you're growing. I told her it hurts when
they slip the blade in slow and twist. It hurts when we separate,

when the world stops rotating, you'll know. And her
heart moves daily down the freeway at 30 mph,
cruise control not really control at all.
Nine out of ten times, strangers
will count to five and you'll explode. And her mouth

exhaling smoke at midnight, steam and milk.
Lean against the backdrop & finger your sorrow.
See the way it purrs? The way it lifts its small
head when you pronounce the word *thren-o-dy* slowly?
The song becomes you, then, it takes you whole and you will sizzle.

When the moon is full we must
howl. We must lasso July
and stomp out the dying embers of resistance.
It's not death, it's a new
method to communion. This time without the baggage.

Gentle Hum

You're the real stranger to the night.
And I finger the day in the backseat
of her father's Buick. Every time she sings.
Tomorrow comes on tiptoe—she's still singing.
And when the ankles break, that's when
you notice the crows screaming. Raise your hands
to the tear in the sky, reach up and feel it crumble.
I feel you rise in my throat—
you picked me up, then put me down
over & over. My feet hurt.
This vicious pain, this terrible vice
is your heart. The only cure is
wind in a jar, anything to stop this beating.
When they razed the bridge, catfish
swarmed the riverbed below, though, of course,
no one saw. We laughed the whole time,
waiting for the sun to come up, waiting
for the river to stop. And it didn't.
You did. Stopped listening, fled
for what you thought was your life.

Consider This

When the gods moan and tumble
I won't apologize & finger regret, my new fractured love.
He bends into the light, reacting to my paleness.
And when cheeks flush & thighs part, we are
inconsolable. Great river of
tomorrow, don't let the sun shine, not yet.
Before dawn she'll peel back her desire
& feed it to the wolves in the field.
They will never tire.

When written down anything can seem official.
Something simple *like I will not love this night* or
something simpler, like *I will not love*
you. Tomorrow I will regret all that was
written. I will burn the words and
sprinkle the ash in the morning coffee.
I will take it black & drink alone. I will
wonder if I can plunge into today without his
hand between mine, our clothes unraveling
each time we speak of unraveling.

Every time I stall my distraction lingers.
Let me scribble obscenities on your belly,
lick them clean then call you *friend*.
And the bowl by the bed keeps us numb.
The rim always too high, or should I say lip.

Parched In An Open Field

Always start with the moon,
then move onto the terrible matrix of stars.
Impossible fates in the constellations are
well, inevitable, as fate tends to be.

Kissing in the field, the moon is bright like
the sun through your eyelids in the afternoon. When we
made exquisite love like tigers eating kill.
Our mouths and hands stained with what we'd done.

That afternoon burned my skin and
to say it was enough would not be a lie. In fact,
I yearned with energy of the sun, rotated like the earth for more
and turned, on my axis, at an angle that satisfied the Pleiades.

Your eyes, your hair curled around my
pride, tying me down, keeping me humble. So
I reeled you in, my token love, my
anodyne. For you I keep my hands clean.

Mrs. Smith By Moonlight

Last night I downed a half-breed of beer—
 half wheat, half pale. They call her Mrs. Smith.
We discussed baseball and philosophy,
then threw darts at our insecurities.
Laura talks to strangers with her cigarettes and her wine.
Strange how smoke, when held in for 58 beats of
 the heart, turns solid when finally let out.
Laura inhales in shifts, she's a sun heating my land,
 a moon among other strange planets.
She, too, sips on Mrs. Smith, when her heart is
 in the off-season. We save up for aged port.
 Talk only on the phone, on weekends, or
 days beginning with T.
I watch her body dance
through the flip-book of photos she's sent me through
 the mail.

The Beating

Beneath our feet, always,
are the dead.
They lay in their graves
solid and unwanted.
Like the Poles, N & S,
or The Land of the Midnight
Sun, there, light sleeps
& never wakes.
Here, apparitions dance and watch
us stroking picture frames.
And windows, when you look out
them, when you press
your lips to their transparent
need to show the
way of things, what then?
What does the dirty glass tell
us of ourselves?
The lipstick, the cloud across
the lip saying *I exist, I have
been here*. A testament
to the faint light behind the ribcage.
And why the heart always
beating its vibrant beat?
A cadence a child could master,
relentless as breathing.

Oblique Intersection

Rain trembled the sky and your kiss
made new pathways to the center
of my chest. The taste of metal and ash
filter my mouth, keep me wanting
new alters, new obsessions.
Every night we eat the stars and
press our mouths to each other.
But this is not love.
What this is: angel wings and butter,
Icarus gone awry, a Saturday
spiked with scars & quiet.
When you left the room,
I reached for the fragments
that comprise our past,
set hope against this reeling
love. We've taken down reality,
folded up the edges & closed
the bronze latch until next season's
unfurling.

Belly Ache

When the clock struck midnight I was
a tortured soul, aghast and
bearing children of metaphor,
see how they need me, aching and
suckling my gumption, electric &
solid. I was rocking hard against
the windowpane, willing the phone
to ring. When it did, I knew
the cosmos were right and
all was torpor & wild grace
lilac scent in the air and I
kissed the floor. Show me a bowl
of soup on a table, in a white bowl,
hot & all for me, & I'll
devour it, my two fangs against the
spoon.

Ice May Be A Form Of Fire

At the Mississippi I saw pigeons walking across

The ice. Frozen was the catastrophe
Of clouds overhead, your hand on my leg.

Silence in the way the hand just

Lays there, fingers twitching slightly.

Colette gave the hand, in French, definition, you call me *oiseau*.

That means *bird* in French. Write to me,
Friend. Your words are an anodyne.

I write with blood all that is important:

Love, lust, luck.

For grins & buzz I shake my fist, full to the brim

Of di & chance. Take me with you. I tote my gun
& book of poems, full of beauty and chaos.

Ride sturdy on the back of a gipsy horse.

Be sure to speak in tongues.

In the morning, give birth to a poem

Which includes a monkey on your back &
A saddle of snow.

Tether

That was when the only word we
could say was *absolve*.
To find the innocence of a child,
grab it, let it revolve, let it orbit you.
Not to turn it into the ground,
draw the soil around it in a circle
& set the whole thing ablaze.
But, this fire can cleanse, can set
a soul right. Can take down
the count & set the record straight.
When we bring the match
to our lips, it's only inches away.
We do it still, we do it to feel
pure again. We feel the burn
shed a layer, strike anywhere again.
There is no other way
to reveal the brittle parts.
Go ahead, wrap your arms around
insecurity and make it happen,
make the darkness go light.
Imagine this: you're standing
on a pier in broad sun, middle of June,
& he just grabs hold of you
from behind & everything stops. You
realize the water is your heart
and from now on he is your harbor.
So tether & soar, break wave
& air across the broadest
parts of your face. Only then will the
seagull break into air, will the
air crack & reveal the dizzy,
red heart at the bottom of everything.

When The Lilacs Bloom

When you said *breathe* I thought
you said *break*. Sorry about the mirror above
the sink. When you opened the window,
how cliché is this wind through
your hair. I can smell the lilacs in the yard.
The yard, a section of creeping field
we've named our own. Lilac sweet smelling
at birth, foul at middle age.
Who needs mirrors when we have the divine?
Taken down and twisted, we must seem
so strange. But propped up on display
our socks never match our ties. To say
this is an accident would be lying.
To say we're not lying, however,
would also be an accident,
& I can't afford insurance.
The bloom of your lips is the lie,
the real reason spring has not come.

Write Something Good, She Said

About the way rain puddles or how
I told her to open the blinds, watch the drops collect.

About drinking coffee black as crows,
hearts big as corner booths.

About the moon on a November night,
our nine collective scars receding slowly.

About our night of dancing, scars intact,
sweat and drink coalescing into light.
The dead bird on the sidewalk, head to sky
looking up one last time to remember.

About your mother, crying and naked;
a night—yes—of unbridled joy
but her hair in knots.
In a story you would create, her hair nested sparrows,
new nests of spring twined with garbage,
littered here and there with forks and photos—shiny things.

About Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* and how you cried
when you discovered you were just like him.
Turning each page bleeding your fingertips,
ink your only anodyne.

About the girl you love, the other you can't help
but bring to yourself. About the night, the great darkness,
and the light that, each time, comes.

The Final Stop

'When I miss her I know
I will never get enough to eat.'
--Dorothy Barresi

Rolling, one body to the ground,
the rug-burn just beginning to show,
I'm on the floor, tasting my own skin, waiting it out.
Opium. Spiked heel to the throat.
When I opened the screen door,
she blew in on the porch,
dead leaves swirling,
the Norther already silent.
And now I'm hungry, for her—yes, but
I must find a way to negotiate this loneliness.
And, all at once, her heart splayed
like a nasturtium, pollen dusting the air, catching light.
I remember her sweat on my tongue,
her mid-day nectar. But the root systems,
these underground veins & vessels, bleat with a tug
& pull not unlike wings on fire.
The sorrow becomes me, these flowers my angst.
And when I swallow, bulbs blossom in my gut.
I taste the stone she gave me, the earth in my mouth.

I taste the stone she gave me, the earth in my mouth.
And when I swallow, bulbs blossom in my gut.
The sorrow becomes me, these flowers my angst.
But the root systems, these underground
veins & vessels, bleat with a tug & pull
not unlike wings on fire. I remember
her sweat on my tongue, her mid-day nectar.
And, all at once, her heart splayed
like a nasturtium, pollen dusting the air, catching light.
And now I'm hungry, for her—yes, but
I must find a way to negotiate this loneliness.
Opium. Spiked heel to the throat.
When I opened the screen door,
she blew in on the porch,

dead leaves swirling,
the Norther already silent.
I'm on the floor, tasting my own skin,
waiting it out, rolling, one body to the ground,
the rug-burn just beginning to show.