

What Is Always Wanting



Mackensie Pless

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Dedications

For my teachers—

Pamela Cumbee, Chuck Sullivan, James Seay,
Michael McFee, and Gabrielle Calvocoressi

For my family and friends—

Mom, Dad, Hopee, Ooma, Gran,
Cameron, and Lucas England

And for the many other Beloveds in my life—

you keep me singing.

Then, her joy increasing, the Moon filled the room
with a phosphorescent atmosphere, like a luminous poison;
and all this living light gave thought and spoke:

“You will remain eternally under the influence of my kiss. You
will be beautiful in my fashion. You will love what I love and
what returns my love: water, clouds, silence, night; the sea
immense and green; formless and multiform waters; whatever
place you are not; the lover you will never know; monstrous
flowers; delirium-inducing perfumes; ecstatic cats on keyboards
moaning like women with rough sweet voices!”

— from “Moon Favors,” *Le Spleen de Paris*
by Charles Baudelaire

I. Her Joy Increasing

Cates Avenue, St. Louis

How dull wonder is
to always accompany
the profession of love

in a car as rain starts
to roll down windows
with the momentum

of tears that only seem
to fall slowly, far too
sudden a stir on the air

around us, cumbersome
for their custom of coming
in floods until parting

lips are pink salt flats
from swallowing them
like words that beg more

in return than echoes,
though meant to be content
in their lonely syllables.

Palisades Park, Santa Monica

I fell asleep watching
the work of shadow
puppeteers in the window—

palm trees, their necks
slender as those of dancers
pitching with the wind
until fronds visit each other
in brushes of listed kisses

like friends sending guests
to their beds, swaying in light
spilled from the hallway.

Temple

There is more than one way
to speak in tongues— *teach me*
Lord, teach me Lord, to wait.

I want to unwind like ribbon
from the spool of his side
with my unclean lips pressed

down, we are shaken together,
running over in measures
that leave me always wanting.

But what can cleanse the woe
of sinners before seraphim?
Remember the holy of holies

as the body, built to be tender
even as it is entered. A temple
is not just some place to kiss

stones—for they have survived
many wars with only prayers
for mortar; whisper them sacred

traveler, you are not the first
to travail on the walls, to wail
for stories the stones will not tell.

My love, he is not a prophet
and I am not his vision either,
I know we are both beggars

at the outer gates of each other
with hunger and thirst alike
to enter the temple, to entertain

angels unawares as strangers
offer their unceremonious alms.
I have seen the seraphim in him

and in myself, we have become
the burning ones in this embrace,

the stones brimming with praise.

The Song of Songs I

The song of songs, which is

kisses of his mouth: love is better than
the savour of good ointments poured forth,
the virgins
the king brought into his chambers: we will be
glad and we will remember more than
black, daughters of tents of curtains
the sun
mother's children with the keeper of the
not kept.
Tell my soul where
to rest for why should I be one
among women,
compared to a company of horses chariots
with rows of jewels, with chains of gold
with studs of silver.

While at his table, send forth
my well-beloved he shall lie all night betwixt my breasts
as a cluster of camphire

in the vineyards

Behold, my love; doves
Behold, my pleasant bed is green.
The beams cedar, and rafters fir.

The New Beatitudes

Blessed is the woman
who smiles mid-bite
to no one in particular
and bakes with an abundance
of butter, for she shall inherit
the fullness thereof.

Blessed is the woman
who measures contentment
in absolute tablespoons
and believes in taking joy
like coffee—bottomless.

Blessed are they that hunger
and thirst after hints of hazelnut
and lemon zest: for they shall be filled.

After the Second Bottle

No one belongs here more than you.
When you slur the title line, its syllables
swirl in your mouth like wine in our glasses.
I am too eager to savor them, an amateur
connoisseur leaving lipstick stains on the rim.
Soon, we will stumble from A to Z Café, warm
without our coats, your arms guiding me home
in the usual almost-waltz of Moscato and Merlot.
For now, this book of soppy pancake poetry
beckons to be read aloud, its Bisquick yellow cover
gaudy against the mahogany table but golden
in our hands when we collapse mid-sonnet
into laughter so absolute, nothing can follow it but
quiet while our fingertips swan across palms.

Dirty Dishes

Washing dishes

while you finish
sending well-whiskeyed friends
to bed, maybe,
or to Uncle Bill's
for pancakes and words more
syrup than sense,

lazy as honey
or hands glancing over pans
with my mind in another room
again—I'm thinking

of before dinner
when stove heat seared butter
and onion into some aroma
heady like incense

while our hips
swayed Motown low and smooth
as Marvin Gaye bringing it home
one more time.

And how mouths
together would make sounds
like sink drains swallow water,
intake too quick

to accommodate
absence when lips shine stainless
after, wiped clean again

but still empty,
a ravine vacant between them
only remembering being filled
to the silver brim,

filmy with Joy.

The Song of Songs VI

is love gone, is love turned
aside? seek him

gone down to the beds of spices, to feed
and to gather

mine: among the
beautiful, terrible

eyes have overcome me:

there is not one barren among them.

There are queens, and concubines, and virgins
undefiled but one; she is the only choice

of daughters blessed queens and
concubines, praised

Who is she fair as the moon, and
terrible as an army

I went down to the garden to see the fruits
flourished and budded.

I was aware, my soul made me

Return, return,

return, return,

look upon

the company of armies.

Palm Reading

Unfolding them for only her
is almost an intimate gesture,

but how many maps like mine
has the palm reader charted?

Hands spread across laps, hesitant
for future definite as skin to be read.

Crosshatched contours open
to heaven, fingertip peninsulas

curling inward like tinder cringing
in fire, edges becoming embers.

Good or bad, I have to tell you.
(I imagine dying young and single,

my pallor indistinguishable
from the hospital room décor: neutral

as purgatory will probably be.) But
she says my life line is long, hazy near

the end—I suppose this is either
a coma or the wonders of cryonics.

More than my hands or the epitaph
she reads etched in them, I am afraid

of the lights stranded in the alleyway
beyond the window. The red lantern

burning out before the rest, forlorn
among the luminous, flickering.

II. Whatever Place You Are Not

Fortuna Major

To the Beloved

You walk in with blanks for eyes
like scratch-off lotto tickets, edges flecked
with old mascara and smudged wings.

Dark circles define how much you've bet,
how much you've lost this time. I collect
discarded heels, untangle jewelry from hair

in the light from the hallway, steep tea leaves
until your lips stop stammering long enough
to drink sleep. This ghost is not holy.

I've heard the goddess of luck is blind
and veiled as a bride, no more aware
of the future than humans are. Beloved:

know you're not the only one here
who feels duped by life's bad deal, empty
hands all out of gambles. Trust in the power

of chamomile to erase forehead wrinkles
from years of overthinking. Add only honey,
if you must, to honesty. Be comforted

in comforters that accept the sleeping body
unabashedly, still or thrashing. Emerge
from the wilderness like a pillar of smoke

instead of salt. Salt the earth. Beloved:
think on these things. For as much as there is
to lose, there is much more to praise.

The Song of Songs VII

beautiful daughter!
the work of a cunning man
is like liquor: belly
set about with
twins.

a tower of eyes by the gate
look toward
the king
in the galleries.

How love delights
his lust

I said, I will go up I will take hold of the
lust like
wine for sweet
lips asleep

my beloved's desire is
Come forth

Let us get up early

let us

flourish,

tender

I give

love

I have laid up for

my beloved.

Beverley Hills Studio

I wondered if we were in heaven or a hospital,
waking up from an afternoon nap to a palette of white
so pristine it could blind. The barren walls
and twisted linens. The curtains sheer Pacific
billowed through from the balcony doorway
as I crawled over your still dreaming form
I could not disturb. And yet—that was paradise.
A terrace in mid-August, almost alone. Kimono silk
encasing nakedness as tulip bulbs folding up
for the night. Behind closed petals, stamens
lifting hands in worship to the wan Almighty
moon, full as the jails. That divot of city between campus
and Beverley Hills lupine for the same aureole;
a valley of palms leaning to meet it like a spring tide.
Neighbors waved Budweisers in welcome, flushed
as I was with the world's clandestine blessings.
Fingers fiddling with the loose bathtub knobs.
Clustered laughter peeling sweat from summer heat
like muscadine skin. Somewhere, a mezzo-soprano
singing Spanish ballads. A stray napkin mistaken
for a seabird in its aimless pirouettes downwind.

Soju I

Sometimes it tastes like water
and we have five bottle nights
with more dares than truths.
Most of the time, it goes down
harder than the walk home.
Min-jae says we do it wrong.
The trick? Flip the bottle.
Swirl it until a hurricane
forms inside the green neck.
Elbow the bottom to shake
all the sediment to the top
like an hourglass. Then pour,
eldest first, one hand under
the other forearm always.

Red Eye, Miami to Seattle

Fly by night. Leave the window shade open
to air pressure and your neighbor's annoyance and
awe that becomes an ache for what
the city below isn't. As much as we scrape
we can't reside in the sky. We are the little glistening
lights that settled like confetti to the floor,
remnants descended from a rager in the heavens
over Miami where angels were singing
holy, holy, be my one and only,
all of them tripping on wings, on prayers.
We are the fireworks in suspense for a second
over Seattle before pluming down to earth,
blooming like a bumper crop of peonies
from a field of upturned faces on New Year's Eve
at midnight, each expression a question—
wishful or wistful, I'm thinking.
From this height, we are hopeless. Romantics
kissing in the midst of so many splendors
overhead. The only cosmology understood is our own.
Bodies of pathless scatters we constellate
inside the space between a glance and a kiss.

Chess Park, Santa Monica

brilliancy: a spectacular and beautiful game of chess, generally featuring sacrificial attacks and unexpected moves. Brilliances are not always required to feature sound play or the best moves by either side.

— from *The Glossary of Chess*

A couple so young (I cannot remember
ever being so young) sit delicate beside me
with eyes out of check, they do not see me

here where I sit delicate with no one, skip
squares that sit delicate as years without
brilliancy—I cannot remember how to get

out of check. I cannot remember how to
skip squares or years. Does no one see me
beside the couple with eyes set for brilliancy?

The Song of Songs V

my garden, my sister, I have gathered
I have eaten with honey; I have drunk with milk:
abundant
sleep, but my heart knocketh,
saying, Open to
me, my sister, love undefiled: for my head is filled
and drops
how shall I put it on?
love put his hand by the door, moved
to open and my hands dropped fingers
on the handles of the lock.
I opened but love had withdrawn my soul
when he spake: I sought but I could not find I called but
no answer.
the city found me, wounded me; the
the walls took away my veil

St. Francis Contemplating

I.

I can't tell at first, does he hold a vase
or a skull, face upwards?
If he stares at empty
sockets like cave mouths, waits for bats
that might fly from them in cyclones. Or the dark
light chokes on
inside a neck's narrow shaft?
Perspective curves
cheekbones into coincidental handles.
An urn to carry, to keep.

II.

Shadows in either
can shatter in the right hands,
never illuminated.

III.

I think what the artist knows
the shadows knew better.
Molly calls it *chiaroscuro*,
from the Italian master Caravaggio.

I take her word for a roll
of slow vowels around my mouth.
Gutters spit rain onto azalea tongues.
Each drop a freckle, a thought.

IV.

After I pulled my hair out,
pinned my lips into snarls of no sleep
for weeks I learned how to laugh
with my teeth. Breathed ghosts in
long drags, the kind that rise
and do not dissipate.

V.

He holds my head,
a light bulb swinging from the gallery ceiling.

The Hanging Dove

*A torture maneuver described by a North Korean defector in which
the arms and legs are suspended with retractable wires at length
in order to inflict extreme pain on the limbs.*

I imagine her flightless,
a trick of taxidermy,
a bird suspended from wires,
bobbing when prodded
into poses unnatural
for something so dead.

the translator enters. Stage left,
a man in a suit who smiles
sometimes, and only
when it is appropriate.

Hundreds of species strung
up by their wings, rigid
inside a make-believe aviary
with their kind, tortured
caricatures of nature.

the translator begins. Her accent
is a long mourning. We catch
cicadas between sentences.

But the woman speaking
has arms like mine. Nothing
for flying South with. Nothing
for pinning from ceilings. Nothing
for—

the translator pauses. The knot
of what he cannot say
unravels slow:

Nothing for dissecting
when they cut her down.
Home is a land of hollows
in the belly, once filled
with food and children.
She wanted—

the translator exits. She is alone
on stage, continues speaking
in a dialect more like lament
for things severed from her.

Words loose from lips
like a flock of doves undone
from their static exhibit.
I cannot catch them.
They are far, more alive
in their distance from me.

III. A Luminous Poison

Fortuna Minor

To the Beloved

Behind the glass shower door, I see her
skin pebbled as a riverbed. Knots of bone
along spine, smooth skipping stones rippling

the surface. We are not alone in believing
what touches us sinks deep like these.
I see the things he did that upset her also

scrawled there in angry crimson, unreadable
as braille raised on a page. I want to be blind
to the script wrapping around her wrists—

barbs from a jellyfish tentacle. The venom
of them sets in as nemocysts release poison
until she is a bundle of gasps and spasms

I gather from the bathtub floor. Nerves
threadbare as the towel that envelops her
shivers, cycled between benevolence

and violence so often they're exchangeable.
Both tender to the giver. The scars outlive
their summers, turn sun into a long suffering

without the hyphen. A lumunious pendulum
in an interrogation room singing: *O death,*
where is thy sting? Beloved, victory is

for the living. Throw the opaque bell back
to sink like a trampled petal. Some creatures
can only drive someone to love vinegar.

The Song of Songs IV

Behold love;

hair

even shorn,
barren

lips like a thread

neck is the tower

where there hang a

thousand

men.

Until

the shadows flee

to the mountain

Come with me

to

the lions' dens,

the mountains of

leopards.

my sister,

ravish

with

eyes, with

neck.

my sister

how much better is

love than

the smell of

spices!

lips

drop

honeycomb

under

tongue;

and the smell is like

A garden shut up, sealed

orchard with pleasant fruits; camphire,
spikenard,

and saffron; cinnamon,

all spices:

living waters and streams

Awake, come blow the spices

here Let me eat.

Kumiho

Call me a fox.
I'll show you my tricks,
be the only woman to swear
she can't survive without
your company and mean it.
We are both tender, hunters
with different games in mind.

Let me play marbles
with your sea glass irises.
The onyx pupils that roll back
ecstatic sometimes would spin
around the table, little prisms
my prisoners. If they were pearls
I'd wear them for dinner,

where I'll order your liver
to go, devour it on the way home
because I'm—what did you say?
Insatiable. A thousand years
of moderation seems wasteful
when I know how easy it is
to deal with devils, to fool angels.

Close your marble eyes.
You cannot catch the little foxes
spoil the vines, the vines
that have tender grapes.
Dream of all the men I've needed
needing me more. It's a shame
they could live without me.

Memento

When I leave them,
I pocket a token:
wine corks,
leather gloves,
blue bottle caps,
even a jacket once
because I'm cold-blooded
like a serial killer or a tourist
I want to remember
the site undisturbed
as morning. Before waking
we could've been dead, cold
and still as we were
when sleep shushed us, said
no questions. Only dreams,
more riddles to unravel
along with limbs and motives
from the night's remnants,
to sort what should be kept
like clothes. One is left
always wanting. I know
too well, what cannot be
gathered from my share
of the scatter at our feet
is petty, dignity
in not going home
empty-handed as I came
when I leave them.

Dream Escapes

We are both of the dark. We know this best
when skin is a pale moon rising to untie
the silk robe of navy sky and you return
to me with ravens. Velveteen wings
matted in the midnight of your hair. I stroke

their slick backs—feathers settle like dreams nest
in eaves above sleep. We exile each other from this
grey country until morning, awake stranger
bodies shivering together. You will ask for
the dream. The one that holds a knife to its telling

until remembering is like pulling shells
from the coquina walls of that childhood castle.
Stone mining skin for broken ocean bones,
that jagged composite of memory and reality
digging into the meat of small palms as I dig also.

We are both of the dark. We know this best
when all waking leaves to be understood
is blood under nails. How could I tell you?
The dream escapes me as it escapes itself,
by whatever means. Stranger bodies shivering.

A Vigil

White candlewax dripped patternless
spatter onto bricks like the rain
that did not wash it away, would not
aid and abet our long forgetting.

Bird noise in trees, a clutter of songs
and wings hunched in branches—
murders that fly from a villain's feet.
Winter's vigil is a continual numbing,

ashes on heads, a dead snow falling.
There is no beauty for them. Only sackcloth
to rend at the city gates for what
we cannot save. Hollow bells collide

against some suspense within, ring
against each other on the hour as bodies
mute the heart's tantrums. We wring
hands the rain would not wash either.

The Song of Songs III

By night I sought my soul I sought but I found
not

in the streets, and in broad ways
my soul I sought but found not.

The watchmen about the city said

It was a little passed from them, but I found

not until I had brought into my house,
the chamber of her that conceived me.

I charge you daughter

stir not up, or awake love, please.

come out of the wilderness pillars of smoke, perfumed with

all powders of

the valiant

hold swords, be expert in war: every man hath

because of fear in the night

made himself

pillars

of silver

covering

the midst

paved with

daughters

Go forth,

daughter

and behold

the crown

in the day of espousal

glad of

heart.

Jawbones For Lullabies

*Out of the eater came forth meat,
and out of the strong came forth sweetness.*

— from Judges 14:14 (KJV)

Here, with the knife-glint in my eye
and night falling thick as your hair
in my hands, I am my own heroine.

You will swear otherwise, insist
that I am loveless. Seductress sent
to ensnare you. But know this,

I was not without love. For such
blind desire I sang lullabies, ferried
honeyed words and meant them.

Then I heard the whispers: A riddle
and the wrath after. A thousand bones
broken upon one. I've known men

apart from their monsters in bed,
but to stir you from rest would be
waking death, asleep on my lap.

Beloved, I've had no jawbone to wield
but my own, pulled out each night
for lullabies. Where your strength lies

I am there also, born to be your villain
as much as your woman. With the riddle
of this last kiss, I leave you here.

A Lament

I knew you like I knew rivers—
the shallows I could wade through
and the currents I could drown in.
From wherever I stood, unending.

How you shimmered like a cut of coal
sometimes, blinking into the sun
that mined light from your face.

And how you'd spend days in bed
when it rained. Dull and listless,
a cold flood rising in your black eyes.

What is left for the body given over
to sorrow, an upwelling like blood
circulating underfoot? I know this is
what many waters cannot quench.

IV. All This Living Light

Paradise

Pull yourself
apart, it's harder
than together.

Composure is
a myth. People
break like vases,
live like heaps
of porcelain pieces
swept about by
routine's broom.

All of us have
our demon dreams
like Eve, awake
with fears we can't
relate to Adam.

The enemy I sleep
with is memory,
whose many rooms
I wander through,

aimless as rain
landing on nothing
and everything.

Bay Area Rapid Transit

You can't wash your hands of it—the city deposits itself in places you don't intend to be touched. It collects there, residual as gum on the underside of metro seats, secrets someone else has already sunk their teeth into years before you. Sit down. Take the train

ride home like a shot, too quick to taste, lips pursed and eyes closed to Oakland. Or, read the graffiti like a cosmic moment prescribed to strike as genius on an overpass. *BELLEAVE* it was supposed to be spelled like that. That the blanketed hills half-unfurled will settle someday and swallow pastel houses down sinkholes like pills until earth overdoses on us, quaking from such consumption. Bequeath

your bones to science. They will be excavated near the exit doors, intertwined with those who had also hoped. No one will know how you died together, as strangers or friends, if you were holding hands with the dread locked man in the back before or after, or who we were inside the disaster. Doors closing.

The Song of Songs II

I rose

among thorns, my daughter

As the apple among sons.

under shadow fruit sweet to taste.

He brought me

comfort with apples: I am sick of

His hand under my head, and his embrace

I charge you, O daughter

stir not up, or awake love, please.

The voice

behind our wall,

at the windows, through the lattice

said unto me, Rise up, love

is past, is over and gone,

time is the voice

heard

Soju II

When I met you, I understood:
The taste was about contrast.
Paired with something sweet,
it would knock back bitter.
When I said I was leaving
the day after Christmas
and you toasted goodbye,
soju never tasted so good.
I know how to say I'm lonely
in at least four languages,
solo, seul, honja and *alone*.
But none of those words
could be as cold as this drink,
that swallowed farewell.

Revenge Fantasy

(No one left me.)

My vow is to be full
and alone as the moon.
Soon, you will howl
for me. My hollows
for eyes will only smile

at how low and lonely
you seem. Longing is
bristling in your bones
for my remote glow,
though you don't know why.

Little wolf, howl
for me and the great gulf
fixed between us now.
How intimate or distant,
you will still see me hover
above you every night,
pale and inescapable.

My Last Will And Testament (Abridged)

I want to be remembered
with some flimsy beauty, words
so diaphanous in meaning
they evade the complexities
of living. We forgive them
because they are selfless
sacrifices on the altar
of my bewilderment. Notice:
She was all gossamer. Someone
nods. How can we know what
she was? There is only knowing
someone is loved, beyond
why. Yes. I suppose she was
gossamer, or something like it.

The Song of Songs VIII

when I should find

out, I would kiss

I would lead and bring my mother who would
instruct me: I

drink of
his embrace

I charge you, O daughter stir not up, or awake
love,
please.

this wilderness, leaning on love I raised
under the apple tree:

seal up heart, seal up arm: for love is
death;

jealousy is cruel as coals of fire, a
vehement flame.

love can drown a man

his house would utter
We have a sister, what shall we do for our sister
when she shall be spoken for?

a wall we will build upon her and a door, we will
inclose her with boards

I am a wall in his eyes one favour
he let out to every one
to bring a thousand pieces of silver
which is before me:

in the gardens, the voice: hear
it.

Make haste, my beloved, be young.

Kintsugi Exhibit

A golden tendril too uneven
to have been drawn stirs the milk
of ceramic on the *chawan*—an interruption
that shimmers as the Colorado River did
on its course through the canyon.

I couldn't know how crystalline it was
at that height, blue and dark as my mother
ocean from the roadside overlook.

Closer, and foamy whitewater pearls
shied then curled around our ankles,
a moment's adornment. The sun's shine
pooled opal in the lines of our pruned skin
and we were like the nymphs in myths,
waiting to fall from graces and rise again
as constellations. This is the art of repair,
an awareness of history as beauty.

The scratches and cracks, the whole
and the shattered, what can be gathered
from the floors of our disasters.

Wilshire Boulevard, Los Angeles

More than the hills stacked haphazard
or palms reaching towards something

like third heaven, I remember the lights
as an otherworld beside our quiet cabs

home, almost disembodied from posts
by their sheer numbers, and the night

so overrun with them that it dissipated
in some places—there, fear of the dark

was irrelevant as we were, playing hide
and seek inside that urban labyrinth.

Lamps suspended like hundreds of suns
perpetually setting above the boulevard.