

Drink

for Don Bertschman

They thought of their bodies as rivers
and dredged the waters daily to find what
was left — a shoe, a guitar pick, a crystal
bead — the current current of want.

He counted every strand of hair on her head,
she memorized his teeth, his blood. He
embroidered her fingerprint on his lips,
she placed his half-drunk bottle of scotch
under her pillow. He said the seas
are mighty. She said my love is mightier.

Eventually they were drawn under,
to emerge decades later as bones.
Taken to the museum in a wheelbarrow,
they were resurrected, the curator
explaining to his patrons: this held
the heart, and this, the tongue. And this
is what they whispered to one another
before they drowned — *we swam, we fished,
we drifted. We clung to the last shore of desire,
and when the shreds of our skin finally
dissolve in this river white with beach,
that is when we will drink one another,
swallow ourselves and sink.*

Dismember

It's not the blood, it's the separation, the part
of a whole left to crawl across the floor
looking for its body. It's the foot
used as a doorstop, the arm holding up
a lampshade, the head in bed with the small man
who strokes its fine hair and whispers
love notes in its shriveling ear. It's the storing
of limbs in the freezer, the old woman
rocking, humming and chewing a hand.

It's the cries of men — no morphine, no arm.
The empty pant leg blowing in the wind,
the basket of parts. It's the phantom tingling
below the joint and the rub of the stump
and its round, raw skin. It's the grainy
video scream as the hooded captor saws
at the neck "Allah Akbar!" god is great.
It's the 12-year-olds with machetes
crossing the Sudan, hacking. It's the look
of shock on the decapitated face.
It's the twitching.

It's the girl losing some piece of herself right now
in an explosion, a rape, a gangrenous disease.
It's the boy burying what's left. It's your cousin
being fitted for a plastic prosthetic,
picturing his lover caressing the stub.
It's the author writing a best-selling thriller
about a killer who collects clits in a butterfly box,
the butcher who grinds meat, the nanny
who pays good money for a soup bone.

Sexicon

I have heard an orgasm called “a small death” —
 most recently, “angels flying” — and I am searching
 my word-brain for something better to explain
 the panic/calm, fierce/sweet, fire/ash of us —
 one word that makes us touch ourselves —
 at a desk, in a toilet stall, the back of a cab.
 The word that summons the open mouth of a first kiss
 and travels to dark alleys, hotel rooms, truck stops,
 the tiled *yes-and-do-it-again* on the floor
 of the men’s room in the Duquesne Club.

I am looking for something as articulate as your eyes
 watching what I can’t — my lips open, back arched,
 body riveted and seismic, a river rising. I am running
 my fingers over my skin, reading poets who find
 themselves in the hipbone of another. I am thinking
 concrete. Fruit. Fire. Comets. Nightmares. Sweat.
 Glass. Rich, red anythings. I am making up words,
 whole languages to explain Armageddon. The whales,
 no doubt, know it — their lexicon, a landscape,
 nuanced and fertile. Then I start repeating

something bigger than love, love, love. 140
 universes of desire. Make it all capital. Make it
 all body. Make it heat and heartbeat, naked and ache.
 Make it light and midnight, the dance of blood
 through the body. Make it the *yes* and the *more*,
 the grace of rain. Make it the gift of everything,
 if just for a moment. The muscle contracting,
 the skin singing, the tongue on a journey
 somewhere damp and foreign. Make it thunder
 and whiskey, the rattling deep down,
 the wreck, the birth, the word before we speak.

Dinner Dream

Somebody's set the table wrong with real linens
and more forks than you can count on one hand.

Somebody's let the breeze blow through the lilies
just enough to make you think it is spring.

Somebody's made sure there's a trump
of cream in the potatoes and pesto mashed

from a basil leaf, perfect as the moon.
Somebody's poured the wine you can't afford

and placed your name at the head of the table.
Somebody's gone through all this trouble —

the music, Miles Davis and White Stripes —
so, when the mood hits you, you can cry or dance.

Somebody's let the dog in from the porch
and given him a bone sweet with marrow.

Somebody should have known you eat a lot and then
throw up, and then wish you were somebody else.

And I didn't even mention the flame, the candles.

Jesus Fish (And Bush Stickers)

*Stay far, far away from them — at least two car lengths —
and never park next to them, it's like tacit acceptance.*

Only small people hate god. I'm getting smaller each day
as I scrub prayer from my skin, itching to eat before

the parents break into song and look skyward. They are
conscientious objectors. Built a hospital in Castaner

to protest the war. Service and hard work, devotion filling
them like wine, a spirit unspoiled by the fickleness of alcohol and want.

What not to say: *Faith is a band-aid. God makes mistakes.
There's no reason this time. That book's really old.*

What to say to those who offer god like a plug
for the hole in my soul, salvation like a presidential pardon?

I'd like to say this: *Fuck you.* Instead, I show them my palms,
how I bleed, explain how I hired a carpenter to fix my fence.

Whore Universe

I don't want talk anymore, your choked, throaty whisper
in the dark alley, my skirt pulled up, bare-assed

against the stone as your/my moans rise up on
the mortar, shadows passing, gaggle of diners,

tongue like a slow knife against my neck.
Forget your fantasies: that girl in the nipples

tid-bit, dancing finger-like behind the diner,
the hard rock of yourself finding its home between

my legs, rigid man want. Quit dreaming so loud,
stupid head of desire, lost boys from yesterday

entering so deep, I wake cumming — hips arched —
cunt wet and telling. What I want now

is some marvel of modesty to transform
this heave-ho dirty-slut girl—mother/sister/

daughter/lover — full and round like heaven,
solid and silent as prayer, blessed

and abandoned like that star fleeing the galaxy
into a light of its sorry own.

How I Came To Love The Apocalypse

For Karen Tozzi-Colberg

Her house still smelled like ham
and her heart felt like sandpaper.
She painted something flowery and hot,
and hung it on her wall to remind her
of the lips she'd tasted, the drinks
she'd poured. She gave the painting
away because it spoke too loud
and then dreamed that John Cusack
stuck her vita on his refrigerator
because he wanted to know her.
She wanted to know him, too,
but the world was ending
and she needed to wash
her brushes, set the bugs free,
and introduce birth and death
so they'd recognize each other
when they met.

Learning Fear At Three

I'm afraid to tell you, she says, calculating cause and effect.

You can tell me. I won't be mad. I just need to know what happened.

I don't remember, she says. It's a secret.

I press a warm cloth to the bite beneath her eye,
apply antibiotic cream, a Dora band-aid and hold her close.

Can I let Bacci in? I ask and she nods.

Bacci looks sad, she says, hugging the dog, resting her face on its fur.

Was Bacci after your chips? Did you pull her ears? Did you hurt her? I ask.

I'm afraid to tell you she says.

I'm afraid, too, I don't say,

like so much else.

Heart Time

For days now, I've been hearing my heart beat.
In my dreams, in the city wind, on the radio.

I've been counting up and down in the back of my brain.
Adding and subtracting like an insistent abacus,

the disks clicking their restless, wooden bodies together
through the night and into the morning, stirring

coffee six times round, then seven, then eight.
It's come to me that I can measure beauty this way,

by counting my presence in this final world.
I can calculate how much it matters to appreciate

the sun; to walk home with a barrette from my daughter's
hair in my pocket, reminding me of time, soft skin,

the first kiss and its pulse, the throb of thunder
timed exactly before the lightning — the flash.

And with each beat, I draw further away from myself,
and into the lovely dance of dying, knowing only

that when it stops, I will hear nothing but your voice,
telling me that the silence is full, the sky, quiet.