

**MOIRA EGAN**





Seven

Consider the dumb beast Lust,  
how she lumbers in, uninvited  
unintentional,  
busts up the crystal stemware,  
leaves your candles burning all  
night, rips your best negligee  
in the most neglectful way  
as if you hadn't spent a  
hundred bucks on it. As if  
she has a place in your bedroom,  
your heart, some argument  
you lost like a poker game,  
all the while never cracking  
a smile. Or consider this:

that she is fine and wily  
as the leopardess Dante  
beholds in the first Canto,  
her coat dappled dark and light  
like sin and salvation in  
the same bated breath. What if  
she is sleek and smart as a  
red-winged hawk, eye unerring  
for the prey, the goal, the gold  
that glints and glitters its sign,  
*Noli me tangere*, don't  
touch. But you will, of course, it's  
your nature to want what's not yours.  
The fetters fall, sad and pure.

*Circe Offers Comfort*

The cyclical of history  
has traced this circle, strange geometry,  
in which Odysseus forsakes his bed  
and wanders back to Circe's isle instead.  
I am the Circe, then, whose father left  
the little girl behind, mother bereft.  
I saw my parents' bed uprooted long  
before that other woman came along.  
My family called her "whore" or sometimes "bitch."  
Meanwhile I learned my trade: a little witch  
who grew into this woman whom you love,  
whose incantations you're enamored of.

(That preposition never suited me.  
I never wanted *of*; I liked *between*.)

Now I'm the whore or bitch of whom they'll speak.  
We know the truth; I'll turn my other cheek  
and try to love you, best I can. It's chance  
that brought us here, and all the potions, chants  
a witch can summon up can only calm  
a little while. Smoothed into you like balm,  
I'll feed you food and watch you sleep. The dreams  
will fade, although I know for now it seems  
her name will haunt you like a childhood verse.  
To walk away's both blessing and a curse.

*SELECTED POETRY*

*Vertiginous*

I walked into the sunset by mistake  
(forgetting work, and love, even this heat).  
Amazing, how the scarlet on the lake  
spreads out like virgin blood upon a sheet  
hung out the next day, wind-whipped, trophy-proud.  
And later, as the haze rolls in, the grey  
of lake embraces sky, a ghostly shroud.

That heron's blue, the color of your eyes,  
his awkward, stalky flapping into flight  
are metaphors as fitting as the night  
we fumbled, one the flesh, into a bed  
unknown, unmade, unmaking, flesh and blood  
the fabric all we are. This feels, you said,  
like vertigo, or falling into love.

*Adulteress Aubade*

How strange it is to wake beside you, love,  
who've only slept a few nights in my bed.  
You comment on the coo of mourning doves,  
those sounds I woke to, wanting you instead,  
the nights I slept alone, your books in bed  
beside me and not you. I never cried  
(I think that's true, of all the things I've said).  
We lie together, wrapped within a lie.

The morning light pours in, reminds us of  
the other places where we've slept. Instead  
we will the slowing of the shadow of  
the sundial, of your hands behind my head.  
We will make time stand still, the poet said  
that that was possible. I know you've tried  
to master fate, the snipping of her thread.  
We lie together, wrapped within a lie.

That cord's been cut. I know it hurts, but love,  
the wound will heal, the throbbing will go dead  
in time. The phantom limb, the empty glove  
will quit your dreams. The spider in her web  
repeats that pattern, awful flow and ebb  
of weaving strands to trap a simple fly.  
You've left your web of years, now in my bed  
let's lie together, wrapped within our lie.

*SELECTED POETRY*

*BloomsDay Poem*

*Molly Bloom*

So let us found a new religion based  
on all that's soft. The world's too hard a place  
for some of us. The mollusk builds her shell,  
a malacology I know too well;  
that deepest part of me's so delicate,  
I've made this masquerade to protect it.  
And you know too it's cruel to anneal  
(that heating and slow cooling of our feelings)  
just to try to get us hard or strong  
enough to face the face where we belong.

For now, come to this temple, my old bed  
(which, if not hallowed, is soft pillowèd)  
and worship: fluid, smooth, emollient,  
your hand in me, my blood a sacrament  
and all that's flown and flows between us, piss  
and whiskey, history.

*Ars Poetica: Etiology of Pearl*

Observe the salt-sweet tissue of this pith,  
its tenderness so aphrodisiac  
that penetration could be dangerous.  
It wraps itself in layers of rough shellac.

But even such strong armor has its chinks  
through which might enter, minuscule, a grain  
of sand or sad that's sharper than one thinks.  
Then nacre's slow embrace encloses pain.

To test a pearl, rub gently on your teeth.  
The real ones aren't smooth, they're slightly rough  
and gritty, like adultery or truth.  
Wear them every day: the oils and stuff  
secreted by your skin will make them shine.

And you know what they say about the swine.

*SELECTED POETRY*

*I am*

inertia: body resting and in motion.

Who knew that after all those years of flight,  
eluding Love and Muse, and crossing oceans,  
that ruby-slipper trick would bring me right  
back where I need to be. So fond of motion,  
I'll try to love this still and starless night,  
the black hole into which I thought emotions  
had disappeared like diamonds, absent light.

You steal my pulse like thunder, or a bass.  
The panther in her cage is wild to hold  
although she paces mildly, as if tamed,  
and in your parenthetical embrace,  
the marks your fingers leave, I have recalled  
the urge, liturgical, to chant your name.

*Sonnet to Insomnia*

It starts out dark. When rosy-fingered Dawn,  
her nails still glinting chipped “Asphyxia”  
by Urban Decay, scratches blackboard-down,  
I’ve lost another night: Insomnia,  
my songstress, whom I’m trying to adore,  
cacophony of birds and garbage trucks,  
the hungry cat who scratches at my door,  
in your firm grip I wriggle but stay stuck.

So rather than bemoan my sleeplessness,  
I celebrate with silky robes and tea:  
a red-eyed yet ambitious Orpheus.  
My mission’s not to find Eurydice  
(whose dark dreams look to me like beauty rest)  
but thumb my ink-stained nose at Morpheus.

*SELECTED POETRY*

*Sonnet to a Muse*

I wonder if the muscle you maintain  
as metaphorical is really just  
another way to euphemise: the pen  
is all we need: forget the heat, the lust  
that drives us, high on octane, low on brain,  
the black & white scenario. But must  
we hammer down that dusty road again?  
I never was too good at lessons, thrust  
the stupid book onto the shotgun side.

You look surprised. Yes, I did well in school  
but never studied; learned nothing by heart.  
Except: it beats, it breaks, it falls and slides  
in trouble, Muse. And my Ice Princess cool  
exterior? My muscles ache your art.

*Emily's Bedroom*

The walls are spackled, wood-trimmed, painted white,  
and sun slants in like music through the panes.  
A dress (the one she wore? I'm not sure) white  
again, pristine and Lucite-cube contained.

Of all of it, her narrow spinster bed  
inspires me most, its wooden straits a womb  
in which a butterfly could incubate,  
a chrysalis to fly from, not a tomb  
of loneliness, as some have seen it. No,  
I see here every straight line of her axis.

Vesuvial imagination flows  
and, as if corseted, she sits to practice  
this lovely, black and necessary art  
that tames the messy beating of the heart.

*SELECTED POETRY*

*One in a Double Bed*

Habitué of velvet nights alone,  
I watch the jewelled movement of the stars  
across the sky. Beside my bed: the phone,  
the books piled high as mountains, pots and jars  
of lotions, lip balms: all I can control.  
Each night I place the pillows at my head,  
between my knees, and smooth the blankets. Sole  
propriety's the pleasure of this bed.

But lately, going to sleep's become a chore.  
My equilibrium's been struck, a match  
that smells of sulphur, lingers pure. Desire's  
to blame again, that scarlet-limned old whore  
whose complications trouble me and snatch  
me from cool reasons to her cauldron's fire.

*Love Stinks*

Darling, you look alarmed when I nuzzle  
up into the warm crook of your armpit,  
a love-hungry sow rooting for truffles.

You don't believe me when I say I like it,  
the scent of you, that blend of pheromones  
and civet-salty element of sweat.

I love the parts of you that aren't pristine,  
like when you come or cry, and you're a mess.  
I've never trusted people who believe

that cleanliness is next to godliness.  
(Recall Napoleon and Josephine?  
He loved her smell and told her not to wash.)

I hate those theologians' dualities,  
the head v. heart, or spirit *versus* flesh:  
I'm on a limbic-driven quest for god. He

lives, post-coital, sweaty, in the body.

SELECTED POETRY

*With a Line from Millay*

What lips my lips have kissed, and where, and why?  
*Why not's* as good as why sometimes, why not  
seduce this boy whose face, in candlelight,  
looks slightly older, almost appropriate.  
Your fingertips might almost brush his hand  
as both of you dip bread into the oil.  
You laugh and make it clear you understand  
he'd rather hang out with a younger girl.  
He says he's never had this wine, *mourvèdre*;  
pronounces that he likes full-bodied, strong  
and complicated wine (you think *educ*  
*able, right on*) and then his hand is on  
your shoulder and he kisses you, his mouth  
quite like a warm, *mourvèdre* fountain of youth.

I

“A glass of wine, a napkin, and a pen  
are all I need, believe me, sir, I’m fine—”  
(Oh please, why can’t he just leave me alone?  
Do I look incomplete somehow, a *yin*  
without her *yang*, that perfume by Jovan,  
—O stinky musk, the Seventies defined!—  
whose bottles, shaped like woman and her man  
fit well together, but looked weird alone?)  
Then Mr. Gorgeous, watching me all night  
to his amusement, walks across the room.  
“I’m sorry, I was listening to your *no*’s.”  
He offers me an origami rose:  
his pen’s the stem, a napkin is the bloom.  
His wine’s divined my inner vamp, all right.

(Though poets lie in service of the truth  
and fiction's simply truth tricked out in lies,  
what do I tell my students, whose sweet youth  
does not allow for gritty subtleties?  
That I commit the crimes of one still young  
and too immortal to obey what's best  
for organs such as liver, heart, and tongue?  
I keep my wild-hair story-box suppressed  
(I love my kids) and though I feel unjust  
I hope they'll understand me when they're old  
enough to see that love's a blinding trust  
that lives, or doesn't, once the lie's been told.  
Therefore I lie to them, so I can be  
a part of them, and yet hold on to me.)

Imagine that he's never had a wife,  
that these illicit kisses are our own,  
that, all right, if we're neither of us home,  
we are invisible despite the lights  
that glimmer on our half-clad bodies, white  
with winter's boredom. He smiled, took the blame  
when he reached out to touch my earring's gleam:  
"A comma, or an angel's wing in flight?"  
he asked. I ask, Is it pathology  
to be content with this position, cramped  
and teenaged-fucking in a just-friend's car?  
I'm punctuation in his sentence, the  
period's stop, the exclamation's amp,  
the comma's pause, that sharp intake of air.

We pause in conversation and the air  
around us stills. It feels as if a globe  
of yellow light's enveloped us, alone,  
and everyone around has disappeared.  
His callused hand is gentle in my hair.  
He's only twenty-five, yet somehow knows  
to kiss me now: "It feels like we're alone."  
(I halfway fall in love with him right there.)  
He's never been to Europe, so we drink  
sangria made of white wine, brandy, pears  
and apples. "It's the sugar in the fruit  
that gets you gone," I tell him, as I think  
tonight he's going to travel. Then we share  
an *eau-de-vie*, ephemeral as youth.