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.
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 the king sitteth at his table, send forth my spikenard sendeth the smell thereof. A bundle of myrrh is my well-beloved well-beloved he shall lie all night betwixt my breasts as a cluster of camphire as a cluster of camphire in the vineyards in the vineyards

Behold, my love; doves Behold, my pleasant bed is green. pleasant bed is green.

The beams cedar, and rafters fir. 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
to the vineyards;
let us
see if the vine
flourish,
whether the
tender
give
love
I have laid up for
my beloved.
Beverley Hills Studio

I wondered if we were in heaven or a hospital,
woke 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. Brilliancies 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
I charge you, O daughter find love tell him, I am sick of him.

What is fairest among women what is

white among ten thousand.

His head is fine and black as a raven.
His eyes are rivers washed with milk sweet flowers: his lips lilies, dropping

sweet flowers: his lips lilies, dropping

gold rings bright overlaid with sapphires.
His legs are marble, his
countenance is excellent

countenance is excellent

altogether This is love and this is my

end, O daughter.
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
checkbones into coincidental handles.
An urn to carry, to keep.

II.

Shadows in either
can shatter in the right hands,
ever illumined.

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 luminous 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.
Behold, thou art fair, my love; behold, thou art fair; thou hast doves' eyes within thy locks: thy hair is as a flock of goats, that appear from mount Gilead.

Thy teeth are like a flock of sheep that are even shorn, which came up from the washing; whereof every one bear twins, and none is barren among them.

Thy lips are like a thread of scarlet, and thy speech is comely: thy temples are like a piece of a pomegranate within thy locks.

Thy neck is like the tower of David builded for an armoury, where there hang a thousand bucklers, all shields of might men.

Until the day break, and the shadows flee away, I will get me to the mountain of myrrh, and to the hill of frankincense.

Thou hast ravished my heart, my sister, my spouse; thou hast ravished my heart with one of thine eyes, with one chain of thy neck.

How fair is thy love, my sister, my spouse! how much better is thy love than wine! and the smell of thine ointments than all spices!

Thy lips, O my spouse, drop as the honeycomb: honey and milk are under thy 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  
spoiling 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. BELEAVE 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
Arise, come away.

in the secret places the
voice, and

the little spoil

is mine, and I

break, the shadows flee away, turn

upon the mountains.
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

O that thou wert as my brother, that sucked the breasts of my mother!

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.