

# 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.