

The Tall Husband and his Sharp Wife

After Cathrynne M. Valente's novel Deathless

I Will Keep Your Death

Winter blows through me
with mouths like shovels;
all of me is skin and bones
even down past the depth of my eyes.
Winter has a thousand mouths
and they all have the yellow teeth of voles,
the sharp of stone on stone,
ragged cut machinery against the soft of you and me.

The dovetail split of you and me
under winter which looms like a general,
snaps like a father's belt,
like a husband's fingers against a tease of skin.

I will keep your death tucked in my cheek
like a pebble, salt-sweet.
I am content on sausage and good bread.
Stroke my heavy fur, brown at the shoulder,
soft and clean as a cat's, a bear's prize.
I wear it often, it becomes me;
your bear, stalking the halls of our fire-made home.

I will keep your death nestled between my breasts
like an egg where it can sleep
by the hearth of my blood and be warm.
I make a home in the corner of a shadow
that falls on a cove of birches.
Here there is no birdsong, only
wheat grass and wild sweet onions
and the creaking of sunlight against the trees.

This is where I keep myself,
and where I keep your death,
in the eye of a needle, in an egg, in my sternum,
warmed by my blood and my desire.
Desire is a living thing inside the birches,
it breathes and snores and hates, sometimes,
when the shadow is thin
and the corner shrinks to a marble
and your death throbs against my bones
like it wants to be born right then, right there.

When you are tired
and my bear shape has gone thin and cold,
when there are no more onions or eggs or shadows
you will take your death from me
and crack it on the teeth of a starving dog,
paint my mouth with the sticky yolk
like twelve shades of gold.

This is how the deathless die,
the dovetail split of you and me
under winter falling into spring
the way careless children fall from trees.

It doesn't take long to kiss away your death
with my nails in your cheek holding on,
licking blood in your mouth like new pennies.
Your death is fish hooked inside me,
I will keep it as I keep your secrets
and you will kneel in the snow as a dog kneels
so that I may press my death on your tongue
like a round communion wafer
not stamped with the cross
but with my own red kiss.

Bird Husband

I have finally come for the girl in the window,
the thick horn sound of my knees in the snow,
stretch of my hand to yours.

I am cold, so cold as marble flooring
but I prostrate myself under General Frost
under my girl in the window, in the doorway.

You wish me to stand
but how will I show I am a dog for you
if you do not tower like a Tsaritsa?
I am a dog, a snake, a wolf,
but more than these I am an owl,
unwise and wanting.

You don't take me inside
but unfold my knees, build up my ribcage
like making a honeycomb
and iron me out like brown butcher paper
until we stand equal in cold and suffering.

The black hole of me
marries the citrus of you
and we are two ruined figures on a wedding cake
holding each other
as we sink into buttercream.

The Tall Husband and his Sharp Wife

There is a waltz inside your bones like a great hall
swirling chiffon and organdy and silk,
candlelight winking in the gentle hand of a husband.

The waltz you compare to a sweet cold death,
the husband to a castle with high dark turrets.
Black blessed, kissed by the smoky breath
a candle leaves behind.

When there is only white and red
spread out around you all there is to do
is walk your bloody footprints
until the rooks come to nest
in the tangle of your violent hair.

Then you are a queen with a crown of living oil
and the husband cannot keep his hands from you,
kisses your knuckles where dreams live.
He is tall and broad inlaid with obsidian
and you stand beside him, small, ruby-studded.
Deathless Gothic in your thick black furs,
your red, red mouth and his eyes like shards of jet.

You are dangerous and sharp but you are also a wife;
he is old and young in one body, bones like planets
but he is also a husband. You live inside each other
like spoons, like bowls nesting,
like a pit burrows inside a peach.

Without you, his sharp wife,
the tall husband is empty as a promise.

Bread and Butter and Roe

There is no design in the table spread
only that it is rich and extravagant
and that you are full and warm by the end.
I have seen many things,
have tasted the sweet jam a sad girl makes from her tears,
but a girl wrapped in furs at the head of a table
is a sight like a sip of good vodka on the tongue.

I compare sights to tastes
and sounds to smells
but there is no comparison to your touch
like a little match at my arm.
You, the spot of red warmth
that burrows into the cold of me.

I smear a thick slab of bread
with sweet cream butter,
spread roe red as an old sunset.
This is my devotion to you
wrapped in the delicacy of a meal.
I will bring you a ring
black as your hair in its braids and pins,
something sinister to match what you'll become.
But now my vows are spread at my table,
once-living things I shot down for your meal.
My promises are slathered on bread,
cooked into dumplings,
served with cold vodka and hot black tea.

I take my love for you—thick brown bread,
sweet cream butter, salt smear of caviar—
and press it in your mouth
with trembling hands
for I know you will be the ruin of me.

Watch Me Closely

I hold up my two hands.
Between them is the space of an hour
and in that space in the black of war.

War is the dense dark of nothing.
It suffocates and consumes
and all those words for *takes, entirely*.

I hold your death magician-light,
sleight of hand comfort, safe in my tricks.
But you despise illusions
and lie to me, what I have is not your death
but a cheap imitation
and now I hold your hypocrisy between my two hands
snug within the space of this hour
as we fight with claws we don't have anymore.

I may be a wife
but I still have teeth;
I am more than a heavy black ring
on my left hand;
I am rubies in my hair
emeralds on each fingernail.
The walls of me are living flesh
chained to you by the entrails of enemies.
We are complete in the guts of men and beasts.

There is nothing cold between us
yet I taste every lie in your mouth.