

María Meléndez

Remedio

Let go your keys, let go your gun,
let go your good pen and your rings,
let your wolf mask go
and kiss good-bye
your goddess figurine.

There is a time to grip
your talismans,

a time to strip yourself of them.

Spirit and flesh
will have sometimes had enough

of go-betweens—

A refastening
of our noses and our ears

onto our soul

can only be accomplished
in the company of master exemplars.

Take wolves, each with a soul full of scents:

asperine willow leaves
and damp earth, willow-rooted.

At the end of summer, a wolf's soul hears

cottonwood catkin's
long trajectory down an ageless azimuth,

feels, in her inner ear,

myriad shifts of air
as the tufted seeds ride twilight rays
and glow as we imagine all
eternal things to glow.

A remedy for when you've lost your sense
of Spirit in the world,

a simple spell for home lycanthropy:

Smell the new season,
acid, tensed to grow
in budding wolf willow,
and feel the heat recede
from a moose's corpse—then
recuerda esta loba.

Recuerda . . . from the Spanish *recordar*
which is at root not remember or re-mind,

but pass back through the heart—

let her pass back through your heart again,
this wolf.

In Biruté's Camp

Suppose God is looking for a good
piece, who could be you with that bare
strip of scalp parting your long hair,
braided loose and looped up in the swamp heat,
sweat curling around your small, bristly eyebrows,
your hands gleaming with juice and pulp
as you hammer fruit on the feeding platform.

That strange orangutan,
the human-raised one called Pan-gan,
who throws men off the dock
like an overzealous baptizer, may
be a god and here he comes
padding side to side onto your platform in the swamp.

If he curves the ridiculous length of his
tendon-riddled arms around your waist
and wrestles you down to the wooden boards,
scream—he's biting you he's trying to kill you—no,
he's pushing up your skirt—

become limp below the waist and make your torso
a flexible branch for him to squeeze
as he swivels from one world to the next;
(now he is calm and deliberate,

now his eyes roll upward)—

When he finally moves off
the feeding platform and into the trees,
rise into this loss, which is relief:
his seed will shimmer out of you, unrecognized.

Nude Sonnet

When studied apart from chickadees and crooked paths, you seem
built of

concave lines
(scoop of shoulder blades, curving pectoral base,
crescent canoe of pubic hair hung from pelvic bones,
soft swoop of glutes, furrowed muscles along the spine);
I'm guilty of examining your form uncomplimented, unembraced—
sink-fixing, baby-washing, goddamn hockey-watching man,
tolerant, tolerant man, why don't you ever say I'm beautiful, but then,
why don't I ever say that you are? I'm checking skin at the boniest
place
of your ankle, and even there it's smooth; consulting the stubborn
worry lines bowed across your forehead, divining the asterisk of hair,
*size of a silver dollar (cupped between your collar bones), querying
the air

along the part (can you believe it) in your armpit to learn if you were
 born
 on the same stained sheets that I was; but any guilt you bear is sown
 in hair sprouting like a trail of needle grass to your navel: beautiful
 man,
 unscoutable meander, my own.

Tonacacihuatl: Lady of Our Flesh

Sacramento Valley

Fragrance of the rain in her breath. The dampness
 at the back of her knees smells like rain also.
 She appears with a shining crow the color of cinnabar,
 and a mark at her shoulder blades displays the same crow.

Poison has made her throat lovely. For that poison,
 praise is chanted in heat-meters making triple-digit noise.
 Part of her has the form of a tule stem, and that form
 she can absorb, if she wants it hidden. And it is hidden!

How many spirits she's twin to, and how long she'll last in this world,
 are secrets stashed in the rattle
 of corn ears, in the coils
 of venomous snakes.

Thirteen mirrors spangle her dress. For those sun-round mirrors,
 praises are chanted by thirteen thousand red-legged hoppers.
 At noon, she steps out of a culvert and collides with the naked light,
 and her fever is an affliction known as August.

So she is, Lady of Our Flesh, who is what is.
 Is she not here, who is our mother?
 Huffing, with matted hair, she stamps a shovel blade
 to begin a small grave.

An Illustrated Guide to Things Unseen

Here's the turquoise cheek
 of a fathead minnow,
 netted from the camo-tint
 can't-ever-see-what's-in-it creek;
 dropped on your palm, its glowing lilac thread
 of spine bisects your lifeline.

Here's the spirit of a rhododendron garden
 (slurp slurp slurp it's all for show)
 impersonating "Redwood Grove" in an arboretum.

Here: two pipevine swallowtails,
 crazy with the indigo smell of each other,
 spiraling past a grinning red cat
 in the ivy, past a bearded man
 on a picnic bench who's leaving
 a short-haired woman, here's
 anger fastening over her
 like an acorn cap.

Here's a rapist's habitat
 between snowberry bushes
 and live oak shadows.

Here's a whole night
 heron rookery in a cottonwood,
 and here's a woman feeding stuffing
 to the ducks; she has bitten the tip
 of her baby's little finger.

Here, the reburied bones
 of the First Woman exhumed during
 construction of a Performing Arts center—

Here's a poisonous oleander,
 concealing a well (and not so well,
 after all)
 from hypothetical polluter-terrorists.

For those of you suffering
 from absence of riverflow,
 here's bowlegged Waterman
 stuck in the ground ("vacuum breaker");
 within his corroded metal
 swish and rattle of water tumble,
 unlappable; its curling rhythm
 mimics the undercurrent of silence
 in the waterway you're trying to love,
 the unyielding laminar surface
 that's breaking your heart.

A Secret Between Lady Poets

How we two lust after news
 from the Peterson case,
 wife & child pulled from the Bay,
 dripping wire & weeds & rec boat refuse—
 talk of the Coffin Birth, coroner's slang
 for a dead child's delivery
 from an already deceased mother; submerged
 as they were for months, we
 picture all tissues softened and elegantly
 torn like damp newspaper,
 baby's lips ragged and fluttering like some liling
 anemone, both of them suffused
 by the faint light found in lurid
 aquarium displays—it's a fact
 your husband's just been stashed,
 ashy and silent, in the baby blue
 urn on your piano. Too bad—he would've enjoyed
 the defendant's fish story:
 "I wasn't boating in order to dispose of a body,
 I was trolling for sturgeon. With lures."

"Oh sure!" Walt would've chuckled sarcastically,
 knowing that tackle's for bass or muskie.
 Me, I'm here for the night, on leave
 from mothering wifely duties,
 making a mourning visit to you, teacher, friend,
 mother-in-tangled-language, because
 we've got to keep an eye out together for whatever
 the hell happens next. You've been breathing
 under the water of grief, I've been sliding through the marsh
 of my own maturation,
 swaying between believing, unbelieving,
 what was early beaten into me
 about my built-in moral defect, naughty mollusk.
 If ingesting the gore of the world with you
 is a favor, it's the least I can do.
 So we sip our Court T.V.
 all night, eat green grapes so engorged
 they're almost see-through.
 Desperation and loneliness lap outside
 your full, square house,
 waves that rise to douse us with desire
 for higher lunacy.
 Up on the main floor, with God's
 chilly wind in our faces
 we can't be bothered with fear anymore,
 we're gaining access
 to the carving hand of the Holy,
 we're slowly exploding
 into nun-ness, and moonlight
 slanting through the blinds
 tracks right through us, translucent as mist
 rising from the surface of sorrow.
 We're sorceresses now, source and mouth, all delta,
 pure, salty confluence
 of the world's terrible, originary forces;
 the remains of our lost lives
 curdle and foam on the shore, display
 the power of decay to begin
 the parturition required

to unfasten dead familial bonds.
 We slip into the continuum
 of women destroyed or nearly destroyed,
 women who surface in frightening forms
 and wreak their stories on shores.

Has it been whispered all along?

She lifted death from Poudre River,
 curled it up in her arms—no
 body (she arrived too late), but death
 remained like flood debris,
 so she carried it until the weight became
 fiber in the bolls of her shoulders;

you know the facts—
 her lover guiding a raft of tourists
 down Pineview Falls,
 the raft flipping, and the rescue
 of all the customers by other boaters,
 the way he waved off the safety rope,
 floated conscious for a quarter mile,
 stood up at last in the shallows
 and took a few steps before collapsing
 from a broken neck—

how his friend called to tell her,
 and she screamed *stop joking*—how
 she dreamed of him that night,
 walking naked towards her,
 muscles twisting like water
 in his lean form.

A tree knows the whole story—
 manzanita, red and gray wood
 intertwined, alive and dead,
 knows she made his death

a skeletal ladder, knows death rode
 her every twist and growing knot
 while she rose toward the reeling
 of the sky—

Maybe death is the wildest movement of all,
 and in this arid range we inhabit
 there is moisture to be found at the boundary
 between the two woods.

Maybe you can follow the orange-waisted ants
 into the tiny space left
 between living and dead;
 maybe what looks like a line of demarcation
 is actually an alcove,
 a feast of hidden droplets—