

The Winter Poems
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I.

Plucked from the heart of my mother's attic,
A blossom, encased in dust.
Mottled shades of once-white there, and gold leaf
Glazing its lacerated petals, between which are
the prayers
I can yet summon forth
From the crypt
of childhood.

The binding's broken,
The cellophane has peeled away,
Leaving yellowed scars. There's no concealing them,
no cosmetic cure.
I press upon the Lord to make me
pure.

II.

And after the slowly indrawn breath,
The breaking of the sacred bread,
The upward thrusting of the head,
We kneel upon the dusty ground.

There's nothing left to do

But prune the rosebush

I had found

And planted this time last year, near
The plaster Sacred heart.

White will bear the silence of the bloom

Red would only throb too soon,

Too loud.

But now as I unfurl the burlap shroud
Like gauze that's toughened tight against a wound
I wonder whether deep within these pleats
And beneath the pyramid of peat,
Beyond the spindly relic of a rose—

Might I there find the feet

of Lazarus, once again discerning cold
from heat?

Or are, perhaps, the rose and he the same?

I hear the wind so softly breathe her name

As I lift the seal of winter

And expose the rose to light.

It is then

That I am swept up in the pull of pallid cells

Reaching out for life, extracting it from air.

And I will take the knife to what I think is dead there,

To that which, I'm supposing,

Cannot be repaired.

Do not despair, my Love, for there is something of a faint sheen

Glowing on this stalk, something that is not quite green

But growing, swelling, something capable of telling

The waking hours from the night,

The rose of passion from the rose

of light.

O Love, do not mourn

Though I'm not at all certain where the line is to be drawn

Between what is merely dead, and what will surely die,

Between what has gone to seed and what is left to rise.

And as I slash the wrist of rosebush, I know that I rely

sheerly on Grace. I think of all the times

her face has been like a prayer cupped in

these hands.

And now they tremble as the cut is made.

Let us contemplate together the dual power of the blade

To lop off the dead and leave the living.

But if there are misgivings
let them be mine
alone.

Yet something has survived the winter's womb
As surely as the dead man did the tomb.
And it is not the dry brush cast aside,
but visions of the bloom yet to arise
that make me tremble so.

My hand is clawed
By thorns that won't let go. The legacy of death,
Or life, I do not know.

Now notice how the full weight of the sky
Rests on the clouds, my Love. And though you lift your eyes
You see nothing but my blood,
Then search my face,
And crawl into my pain,
Your tears nearly concealed
behind the sudden veil
of rain.

The One who fastens tears to love
Binds the rain to earth.
"This rose," I say, "in pruning me
Prepares me for rebirth."

And so we wait for buds to form protection against loss
While above our heads, a pale rose blossoms
Where our spirits cross.

Strike the tip of this bloom, O God, against Thy flint,
Refining human needs,
And accept Thou this, our kindling,
Toward Thy whitest heat.

III.

And when the snow has sifted into my hair, what then?
Will I be less a woman, or you, a man,
when passions blanch and blankly stare through opaque eyes?
Some one of my sleeping selves, no doubt, will rise
in ample time to greet me there, at vespers,
in the sibilance of prayer.

You recall, I gather, our last parting,
How you drew me in like breath
and how our depths suspired in the stillness and the grace
of an unspeakable embrace,
Your touch too light to agitate a single strand from place,
too soft to cause a stirring in the air.
And now I'm almost moved to doubt
that you were truly there;
But then, of course, the snow has yet to calcify
my hair.

Yet when the sifting of the snow is done
and highlights glisten silver in the sun
or lavender, I'll venture, in the moon,
Then I suppose I'll learn that one must trust
the looming shadows, and the ghosts
that infiltrate but scarcely touch,
impassive in the face of passion's thrust.

And when the frost engraves the glass, and I seem numb,
and only an explosion of the dying sun
will be enough to clear the crystals from the pane—
though vision, having once been lost, will never be regained—
From some internal vista, still I'll lift my eyes
and in the scudding clouds, perhaps,
I'll recognize my fleeting face, and yours,
when the snow has sealed me in
and drifted up against the door.