

prey

JEANANN VERLEE



Black
Lawrence
Press

for Broken Thorn Sweet Blackberry

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“It’s difficult to think yes. Or up.
When all you feel is fight or run.”

—*Lidia Yuknavitch*

The Curse

When I arrive, fish rise belly-up
to the mouths of their tanks.

Sewer rats gather at my feet,
keel to their sides, stoic as stones.

Sparrows drop from trees in my wake,
spattering the sidewalk red.

Above me, squirrels hang
slack-necked from telephone wires.

Waterlogged mice float to the brim
of my rose oil tub, eyes bulging.

Glass-eyed elk sprout from the walls
of each restaurant I enter.

Pigeons and stray cats launch themselves
at my windows, leaving only a lonely smudge.

All the neighborhood dogs
turn up blue and foaming.

Yesterday, an elephant raged head-on
through my bedroom wall, bled out in my arms.

He Wants to Know Why Sometimes in the Face
of Conflict I Neither Fight nor Flee, but Instead Go
Disconcertingly Mute, Eyes Locked Ahead Like
Some Sad Dead Thing Looking off into the Empty
of Its Own Future

Children who have no escape
from the hands that harm
learn to die over and over again.

Ode to My Mother's Backhand

I loved, as a girl, to help paint your nails,
their perfect almond curve. Longed

for the same smooth knuckles, mimicked
the ritual of cream. I cannot forget the heavy,

honeyed scent you left behind. My elbows,
shoulders—the oily film remaining

after grab and shove. Effortlessly softening
the cruelty of any mood. O dainty left,

clattering with hand-me-down gold,
how I coveted your pitch, your reel.

The sharp bite of your angles. Sensuous
fingering of a cigarette, rocks glass.

Studied you, wrist-deep in the raw mash
of meat, egg, catsup, watered bread;

the whole-hand crush of canned tomatoes;
petite fork-whisk of powdered sugar into milk.

Eucalyptus rub on my congested chest,
your gentle swipe of tears, the intricate fold

and knotting of braids. How, I'm sure,
some part of me remembers your lift of breast

to my infant mouth, calm stroke of my hairless
scalp, the bath, the swaddling after.

Such precision, even in beer-battered rage,
to spin my jaw in whichever direction called.

The hot red blossoms you lured to my cheeks.
Shrill crash of a vase knocked from its shelf,

bowl of cereal struck from my hands.
The blood-tooth launched skyward.

O commander of attention, how I'd seize
at your slow rise from across a room.

Such power. A noiseless siren
wailing, *I will come for you, child.*

Secret Written from inside a Snake's Mouth*

In the mornings, when she was still,
overcome with quiet—less drunk than sober,
less fang than nurture, I would rise
before school an hour early, crawl into her bed,
nestle into her rising and sinking chest.
I'd lay there listening to the soft hum
of her warm breath, tuck myself under
her sleep-dead arm like something wanted.
Like a girl a mother could love.

* Venomous snakes immobilize prey by injecting a toxin which begins to break down internal tissue, starting the digestion process before swallowing the victim whole.

The Happy House

The house, they say, was once brick with a slate roof.
Changed in June after the new family moved in.

The morning after the last of the furniture was delivered,
all the leaves in the backyard dropped from the trees.

The warm red bricks frosted over, turned to solid ice.
Rosebushes in the front yellowed, then browned.

By July, pines along the block withered to brittle stalks.
Lawns and parks turned the color of wheat, the sky clouded.

Townfolk took to down coats. Children returned to school.
Meteorologists puzzled. All the birds flew south.

A Good Life

They cornered the child in the forest.
Removed his clothes and loved him.
He walked home shirtless, stinking of men.
In high school, he kissed a girl.
Learned what to do with his tongue,
trained his fingers into fists.
He stole chocolate bars from the grocery,
lighter fluid, boxes of cigarettes.
Grew handsome and lean.
The first pregnant girl sent word
of her suicide in an unmarked envelope,
which he promptly burned.
The second made an easy wife.
He bought a simple house,
a lawnmower, two rusted cars.
Studied mythology and auto mechanics.
Took a job in a gas station
at the edge of a clumsy town.
High school girls gathered in the parking lot,
popping strawberry bubblegum,
eyeing the steady branches of his arms
as he wrenched and geared and oiled.
The dumpster behind the shop became a hamper
for undershorts smeared with pink lip gloss.
Caught fire every few weeks.
At home, he learned to wash plates
and fold towels. Take out the garbage,
bury hamsters, hammer nails into crooked things.
When the fourth child arrived, an idle boy
who smelled of mothballs,

he quit the auto shop. Took up chess. Cigars.
Pornography. The day the boy turned seven,
the man—now limp and grey as dishwater—
walked into the forest, found a blackbird to shoot.
When the bird refused to die,
he tore off its wing. It only looked at him
and blinked its stupid eye.
He delivered it to the river.
Watched its tiny beak fill with water.
Its eyes, gorge. He stroked its slick feathers,
their lovely, lovely gleam.

The Hunter, His Weapons

So many ways to take down a beast.
Smith & Wesson, Glock, bow, spear, Bowie knife.
Buck, antelope, bison, grizzly.
Duck, pheasant, quail. Bobcat, coyote.
The care he takes in preening:
dismantle, oil, polish, reassemble.
Displayed in an ornate case or above a mantle.
Assault rifle, sniper, bayonet, musket, six-shooter.
Hollow points and silver. Arrows dipped
in something shocking and murderous.
Sword, cutlass, machete, dagger, baton.
He is meticulous, gentle. *Buff, stroke, clean.*
Such dreadful worship.
More tenderness for the killing machine
than those who will die.
But when he discovers his hands
—those remarkable hammers—
his love is boundless, alarming. Unstoppable.
There she is, asleep at his side.
His knuckles buzzing, *Take, take.*

Unkind Years

Did he (drink to a stupor by noon / wither to bone / stash a case
under the bed / drink it secret and warm / fling you against a wall /
toss your goodbye pills / keep you from the knives / fuck you despite
your unfortunate madness / play your song in the strip club / dance
without you / silence you with silence / move to the couch / the
floor / blame your wildness / blame your quick sickening / take the
last of you on the living room hardwood / sharpen the blade before
the cut / curse you) kiss you first?

The Sociopath's Wife Meets The Wheel of Death

Some don't watch. I do.
I climb to the platform eager.
Spread myself against the wheel wide
as a starfish. Let him bind my wrists,
ankles. Wrap a pair of ruby lips
around the ball-gag.
Some stare at the spotlight
or into the dim of the crowd.
Prima donnas demand a blindfold of their own.
Not me. I like to watch his eyes close,
watch as he tightens his mask.
Look, how he stiffens
as the wheel begins its spin.
His free hand shaking beneath each knife.
With every reel-back, my muffled squeal
guides him toward the hit.
Each heavy *thunk* into the plank,
another moan. *Thunk! Mrmph. Thunk! Mrmph.*
Then, when the crowd least expects,
Thunk! Thunk! Thunk! Clockwork.
Gasps rise from the audience.
The wheel trembles.
I watch their faces, the horror.
Watch him steady for the finale,
his greedy dagger hurling for my throat.

Secret Written from inside a Coyote's Mouth

I would sit a full lunch hour in the park waiting.¹
Every day.
My shadow sagged her despicable shoulders.
Sunglasses hid my idiot eyes.
I skulked behind the pages of a book
as if my body could render so easily invisible.
There, I waited.
Predictable. Ordinary.
I waited days. Then weeks.
He did not come.
No, I didn't know what I was doing. Or, not doing.
Not exactly.
I only knew *escape* and its furious heat.
Each night, I'd arrive home,
rejection's dirty smear across my face.
A sin my husband could never kiss away.
Each night, I'd spice his soup with extra peppers.
More and more, each time.
Trying, however small, to burn us to the ground.²

¹ Coyotes are known for being devious.

² Coyotes are also known for being monogamous.