

This Bright Darkness

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Black
Lawrence
Press

With gratitude to my mom and dad,
for showing me how to love the world
and find the music within it.

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*The lives of children are
Dangerous to their parents
With fire, water, air,
And other accidents;
And some, for a child's sake,
Anticipating doom,
Empty the world to make
The world safe as a room.*
—Louis Simpson

It's strange that our love of Beauty should lead us to hell.
—Robert Bly

Prologue

*Chorus: After 13 Months of Searching, the Girl's
Body is Found Five Miles from Our House*

Nights we sat down to dinner, interlaced
our fingers and recited The Lord's Prayer,
she was there, taking root, a seed
with his seed inside her.

Abandoned by the sun,
lost in the thick woods
of some man's fever,
we can't stop looking at our daughters.

And when the girl's mother appears
on the evening news, distraught,
but grateful for a body, we understand.

From the deep well of our wombs,
we draw our daughters up,
bring them to our breast,
quench a thirst they didn't know
they had, saddle them with hunger

so they might stay.

Let it not be his hands that claimed her. Let it be
the tender dirt, the earth slowly awakening
to her body as it softens in the sun,
preparing her,

each pearl of larvae working to ease
the burden, to release her
from the body that caught his gaze.

I. Return

Chorus: The Flowers Advise Girls on the Cusp

You can call it rot. Or you can call it rust.
Either way, this story is so old, it's written in dust.

He wants you soft and fecund
until he gets you alone. Then he'll show

the fact of his body; how a man only needs one hand
to circle both of your wrists.

When he flicks his lit cigarette to the ground,
you'll know sorrow

that slow grind of boot heel
against wet earth.

He believes the only way he can harden,
is if you shed your name. (By this we mean to say

he wants you gone, wants you
broken.) Girls, cock your spines and listen:

fear makes the eyes and ears bloom.

Press that black flower to your face.
Learn its scent like your own flesh. Come spring,

let us cover you; let us dress your wounds
with fragrant blooms.

Persephone's Statement

He said my mother had set the whole world
on fire, so what was the difference? I was always

thirsty. He said the body is a ladle. He promised
I would learn to burn beneath his gaze;

that if I closed my eyes
and told him where to put his hands

I'd hear the brook where I used to bathe.
He said the body is a field,

said if I softened beneath him,
the grass above us would green again.

No. I don't sleep. When I dream,
it's always the same

Mother leans in to kiss the top of my head,
and I am pulled under. My hair,

once famous to the sun, gone anonymous,
fused with the old cottonwood's roots.

The world above me is on fire. The rivers are flowing backwards;

the sky is falling; the calves in the fields cannot drink
from their mother's teat, and the grass doesn't remember

green. It's my fault. If I soften beneath him,
he promises the sky. I open.

Demeter's Statement

Why famine? Because you can't set fire
to what's green. Because grief comes
when you're emptied of everything
but longing. Because nothing

could sate me, I had to feed on my imaginings:
the sinewy neck muscles of a husband, hungry,
kissing his wife's sharpened clavicle,

her mouth a sorrowful *O*.
Because I was all alone
and the heart becomes offal
when a mother is told over and over

that her daughter is just another
siren, a warning, a story to be taught.
Because a man's desire, that knot,
is what tends to this rot.

Because I wanted them to know
what it feels like when every prayer is hollow,
nothing but an ask, a bid, a gamble.
I wanted it to be their hands that trembled

as they touched match tip to candle,
trying to drown the hush
of a suddenly empty cradle,
another small mound of fresh dirt
atop the burial plot.

Persephone, Stumbling into Morning

It hurts. The sun. The salted air.
Those red flowers. Their swollen pistils;

the heifer's udder, raw,
dragging on the ground.

The men, their children starved
by Mother's rage, bow

their heads when I pass. When they kiss
the hem of my dress, I call it *reverence*,

but Mother says that when night falls,
these men, hardened by the now rich soil,

turn to their wives
and grin, slide their tongues

over their teeth as they recall
my story, see me bound and writhing

beneath him,
a pale girl hooked and split.

Persephone in a Crowd, Watching a Wedding Procession

What child has patience for symbols,
those gauzy saffron veils, the bride's wrist

in the beloved's grip as he leads her away.

I remember when my own mother
said not to worry. Said I was a child of the gods.

Said I would never endure such a procession.
Said when it was all over

there would be a feast. There would be gifts, that every bride
is given a painted vessel for fetching water.

I was small. I held onto what I was told and carried it.

I did not know that those women disappeared into the hills
singing and returned mute, blood in their mouths, thighs raw

and burning, the cracked vessel in their hands,

all that water, wasted.

Demeter, Watching Persephone at Her Mirror

She slips out of her dress, turns
this way and that, cursing her breasts,

her stomach, her thick thighs.
Her eyes are crushed geraniums, her mouth

a study in sorrow. Hollow girl, full
of echoes. She pushes her food

around her plate, only pretends
to put the spoon to her lips. How

do I tell her that Man's desire is hunger,
and we are built for famine. I know

she is trying to disappear, to transmute
herself into light. Air. But the girl

is my stock. And her flesh,
that tightly woven basket,

is built to carry the weight
of every harvest moon.

Persephone's Appetite

Mother sets down the plate, pushes back my hair,
leans over and whispers into the top of my head,

Eat.

How can she not know that grief
resides in the gut? Black and sweet,

I can't swallow these figs
ripened by sun and air.

The teeth are willing to bite and tear and gnaw,
but the throat, the tongue's betrothed, tightens.

The body begs to be fed, but since returning
I know my blood's already slowed. Like a child

learning its place in this world,
my heart repeats the only word it knows

no, no, no.

Chorus: The Newscasters

Vanished for so long
the disappeared girls always come home

empty, their eyes, boarded up,

their bodies, a series of locked
doors. Their mothers reach for them

and say, with their embrace,
You can climb out now, you're free.

It's spring. We keep insisting
that the sky is falling. And the mothers

keep grinding the coffee beans,
listening to our mourning forecasts

while the fresh-faced neighborhood girls
trudge toward school, peonies

hanging their heads under the weight
of their own blossoming.

Persephone's Guilt

When I close my eyes
I see the bouquet gathered that day.

I try to change it, but the story sticks.
Flowers tumbling from my hands,

shattering, the hyacinths in shards at my feet, slivers
slipping into my fingers when I stoop to gather them.

His want had me trapped in my skin.
When the door moved, it was only, always,

Him. And when he entered, I closed my eyes,
saw the mouths Mother emptied with drought,

hollowed and packed with dirt.
Those voices still tendrils into my dreams, whispering,

rain, rain, rain. I wake parched,
hunted by my own name.

Demeter Explains Her Sorrow

When you first disappeared, I wept into my hands
and drowned. I swept our house clean and scoured its walls

with my own screaming. Suffering
the sun's silence, I said nothing, cut

out my tongue and buried it among the lilacs. I watered
my garden of stones until, strand by strand,

I began to tear each hair from my head
to weave a noose. Oh sorrow, sorrow,

buried by my heart, do you know how long
I carried that small bird in my cupped palms?