CARNAVAL

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POEMS

SUSAN L. MILLER

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Poems

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For Iris

And in memory of +Marie Birmingham Ponsot

Pies para que los quiero si tengo alas de volar?
Why do I need feet when I have wings to fly?
—Frida Kahlo

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ECCLESIASTES

God wants me to spend my days
with dirt under my nails,
planting tomatoes and chilies
by the backyard fence. He knows
the tomato plants will thrive
and in five years the fence will fall
and someone will have thrown
a naked baby doll on the roof
of our house where the chimney slopes.
He doesn't care. God knows
a day with the pick and shovel
is good for the growth of my soul.
After my blistered palms have swung
the wooden handle and broken ground,
after I've wiped the sweat off my face
with my forearm, and laid the tools down,
he'll tell me in my sleep that wisdom
was the right thing to ask for. If I remain
in the rows of seedlings, one day
I'll reap the riches of any life. A crop
of tomatoes so large they split their skins.
An evening on the back porch
smoking Marlboro Reds, listening
to the cicadas sing. God intends
for me a life of good labor,
a mind that turns this world
over and over, cultivating it
until something blooms so stubbornly
it overtakes the garden.

I

Je ne regrette rien

POLAROID TRANSFERS

You've sent your recent photographs: winter
with black tree and whirling light, sepia bloodroot,
vase of thistles by your window—
but this dune I like best. You've pressed the wet negative
against stiff paper, and rivulets like fine threads
trouble its surface. Here, too, scars form, and white
shows through the torn skin. It's been years since I
saw you, old friend, years since we sat by the dark pond. Years too
since you posed me in the clawfoot tub, in empty schoolrooms,
laughing in the night kitchen. I know you remember how I loved
to play boy to your girl, lying with you curled against
my long body. Do you remember how out of love
I was that year, how I ran like a sidewinder in sand? Now I live
in sand, perfect crease of this dune separating dark from light.
Every so often, I hear from you: caves in Colorado, camera
in hand. Hibiscus grows in your arid climate, bristles
into bloom between stiff leaves. Lately, nothing grows here,
but I watch your photograph for signs: wind, maybe. Desert snow.

THORNS AND DUST

I.

Breathtaking, the news I received of you
over lunch: three red letters and one plus.
Too simple, this equation, for someone who
twists wit equally from three languages,
who multiplies the charm in any room
to a power of ten. Two months ago
at B bar, I watched you and Julie swoon
against each other laughing, your pale throat
exposed, her red hat bobbing in the blue
haze of the gin I nursed. *It's the one pure*
thing, I thought, *the friendship between those two.*
That wise, complicit laugh: we've all been sure
we'll never die, but you make me believe
you've seduced death and won. I'll never grieve.

2.

You've seduced death—I'll never have to grieve:
the medicine these days, the pills doled out
from the local pharmacy can deceive
even the virus, deter its harm en route
to all your cells. I pity your illness:
it doesn't know, behind their frail façades,
your lovely organs travel with no less
than forty swarthy, muscled bodyguards.
You've seven-veiled it, dear Scheherazade,
story-told your way to brilliant morning.
You flourish, shimmy, promenade
and flaunt your great escape. But here's a warning:
don't spend your beauty, even though it glitters.
Nature devours what's prettier than it is.

3·

Nature devours what's prettier than it is,
no matter how brilliant or seductive:
how many evenings have we spent like this,
catching strangers' eyes, forgetting we'll relive
our second-circle hell with beauties we'll abhor
once dawn comes? Sometimes our nature
too turns like the worm: the high as paramour,
illusive blue-black barroom lights, shudder
of wet skin against cold porcelain, taste
of bile, grit of ash in the back of the throat,
and suddenly the world's a gorgeous waste
of gorgeous flesh, of eyes and lips, and floating
on the waves of dizzy heat, we're spent,
breathless, wax-winged, storm-tossed and radiant.

4·

Breathless, wax-winged, storm-tossed and radiant,
Lucifer burns like a moth drawn to sun,
despite the myth. He plunged from his ascent
without feeling the wind change, and none
of his feathers reached the earth. Some have said
he turned the world inside out. Some will swear
he appears monstrous, his eye reflected
in vial or needle, a glowing cinder.
They lie. I know his call, the stunning pure
voice that scales my name, an aria—he's
unconvinced he's fallen, his pain a pleasure
deep and ragged. No matter how he pleads
for false delights, stop your ears, close your eyes:
he'll show you hell and call it paradise.

5·

If we're in hell, then what is paradise?
I think they must be very much alike:
two dance-halls full of grinding hips and thighs,
a music thick with beats, and at the mic,
a glorious soprano androgyne
whose voice enters not the ear but the vein.
What we absorb through that IV defines
whether we live in love or shocking pain:
in hell, a sort of poison that corrodes,
a doubt that ties the heart into a sack
and pumps the body full of foreign code
unreadable, unknowable, a rack
on which the body writhes. In heaven, then,
a healing enters, sweet as heroin.

6.

A healing enters us, as heroin
traced back in time becomes its elements.
Remove the chemicals and heat, caffeine,
traces of powdered milk and agents
for weakening. Unwrap banana leaves
to find the brick of opium, then scrape
it back onto the ovary. Retrieve
the knife that scored the capsule. Take
the poppy's heavy head in hand, and seal
the cuts made in its skin. Let the thick gum
stay in the flower. Let the flower heal
until dropped petals blossom red again:
let stem and stamen, sepal and fragile leaf
return to seed, deep in the chilling earth.

7·

Return to seed. Deep beneath the earth
we'll all return, beloved friend, if we
don't choose instead to fly (handfuls of ash)
across the sky. How can we ever leave
a piece of us here, anyway? Paper crumbles.
Friends of ours who grieve
will pass on too. Time is a lit taper
in a city of high winds. All we have
is the body we give, over and over.
Soon enough we'll all be dust, the blood
that runs in our veins stilled forever,
the love that fills our lungs in a flood
of indrawn air—that too—
it stopped my breath, the news I heard of you.