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Ayekayi May Lwin ~ *First Place Winner*

untitled

i wish time let you stay,
but you were always meant to live cities away.
we talk every night through a screen,
but it is still not enough. i want you here next to me.

-

you and i are rooted in different places,
sending honey bees to deliver our messages
across mountains and seas
and everything else in between:

*i love you from here
even though i can't reach you,
i'll visit when i can, i'll see you when i see you.*

-

i wrote so many poems about you that i forgot i am a poem too.

-

void

it doesn't matter how many people are in a room with me.
if you're not here,
it's empty.

-

lux

the stars aren't as bright as they were before,
but i still love you as much as i did the nights they lit up the sky.

Mykala Dawn Robertson ~ *Second Place Winner*

Simplify

Dripping amber; light as air, thick
Sticky honey, sweet nectar dribbling
Over lips, feather tips-- wings
Flutter, hover, cut; to soar and savor
Supple spring blossoms.

Just as a hummingbird trusts the breeze
To lift her wings, I strive to simplify.
Nature provides for even the greenest bud.

A God's Requiem

When I look at you, my heart starts pounding
Like speeding through red lights at three A.M.
100 miles an hour
Sunroof down, the moonlight my companion
Lungs and throat burning with the depths of my heart
A reminder that I'm not impossible nor unstoppable
But mortal flesh and dirty blood
Like I can pretend for a moment it isn't stardust running through
my veins
But something much darker
Something much dirtier
Something much more earthly
Unholy, deadly, broken
Perhaps this is what drew me in
What tore me away
The feeling that you rip up from inside me
The monster you brought forth
Seeing red where I used to only see blank and white
If the fire and brimstone in my soul when I look at you
Or when your lips and body press heavy against mine
Is what it feels like to be truly mortal
I don't think I mind

Ashton Nichole Cox

I never knew I could be loved

I never knew I could be loved
When I had so many broken pieces.
But you made it seem so easy
When your love put me back together.

I know now what it means
When they say “Love conquers all.”
Because now I know we will make it through
No matter where we may go.

Bailando

Estamos bailando suavemente,
Bailando por la cocina,
En tus brazos,
Mi cabeza contra tu pecho.

Pero, no hay música.
No la necesitamos.
Bailamos a nuestro propio ritmo.
Bailo al ritmo de tu corazón.

Mi hogar está en tus brazos.
Eres las paredes de mi soporte.
El calor de la cocina,
Eres donde me acuesto.

Cuando bailamos juntos,
Estamos en nuestro propio mundo,
Nada nos importa,
Nada nos molesta.

Vivimos en paz por un minuto,
Pero parece una vida
Vivimos cómodamente
Respiración por respiración

Estamos bailando suavemente,
Bailando por la cocina,
En tus brazos,
Mi cabeza contra tu pecho.

Pero, no hay música.
No la necesitamos.
Bailamos a nuestro propio ritmo.
Bailo al ritmo de tu corazón.

Bailamos al ritmo de mi corazón
Trabajamos por el mismo motivo.
Por la salud de nuestra vida,
Por la salud de nuestro futuro.

Te agarro y me agarras,
Y cuando estoy en tus brazos,
Estoy tranquila y calma,
Puedo dormir profundamente así

Contra tu pecho, mis ojos cerrados,
Escuchando a tu corazón.
Nos balanceemos de un lado para otro,
No me dejarías caer

Y no necesito más que la música de tu corazón

Ashley Ryan

The Dance

We are swaying slowly,
Dancing around the kitchen,
In your arms,
My head against your chest.

Though, there is no music.
We don't need it.
We dance to our own rhythm.
I dance to the rhythm of your heart.

My home is in your arms.
You are the walls of my support.
The warmth in my kitchen.
Where I lie my head.

When we dance together,
We are in our own world.
Nothing matters,
Nothing bothers us.

We live in peace for a moment,
But it feels like a lifetime.
We live comfortably.
Breath by breath.

We are swaying slowly,
Dancing around the kitchen,
In your arms,
My head against your chest.

Though, there is no music.
We don't need it.
We dance to our own rhythm.
I dance to the rhythm of your heart.

We dance to the rhythm of my heart,
We move for the same goals,
For the health of our life,
For the fruition of our future.

I take you, you take me,
And when I'm in your arms,
I am tranquil and calm,
I could sleep soundly here.

Against your chest, eyes closed,
Listening to your heart,
We sway side to side.
You never let me fall.

And I don't need anything more than the music of your heart.

Lisa Rutledge

Beware of Love

Perhaps what's most adored by human souls
are not the forms a person's arms embrace,
nor empty smiles greeting each return,
but cheerful recognition sensed and seen.

We know the soil left behind by those
who would defend their nation isn't why
they'd give their lives. And neither does the cloth
of banners ask for sacrificial deaths.

It's feeling moving those who put themselves
in danger, whether serving country, town,
or simply shielding family, whether linked
by genes or not. It's kinship people love.

We journey far for kinship seen because
Of vessels holding traits we see or wish
we saw within ourselves. A flag or word
itself cannot contain such traits, it's true.

But that which doesn't carry traits we love
evokes within us love we have for what
allows us all to say that *we* belong.
And yet, we must beware such love's constraints

Beware that vessels bearing traits we love
do not enclose us, keeping out the folks
in whom we haven't *yet* beheld the same
desire to find in others shared ideals.

Emily Renea Hertel

Her Bleeding Heart

I see her on rare occasions
Reading, singing, dancing, and loving her slice of life
A true rare blaze of golden light
The kind who seems so blissfully happy nothing could hurt her
Happy enough to hide the truth
The truth that she's sad, broken even. Today is the saddest to her
Today's a day of love
However no one calls her and she'll avoid people all day
For sometimes even a celestial body can dim
Yes lights can lose their sparkle
She won't let anyone see her become blurred or shadowy
As shadowy as her red vital fluid could be
She will hide her bleeding heart
A bloody valentine given to no one.

A. M. Giroux

Good Morning, I love you!

I hope I didn't wake you when I got up
You felt a Little cold when I kissed you
So I wrapped you up in some blankets
Thank you for breakfast this morning
You put so much love into it
It's like a Little taste of you
I went out to run some errands
I stopped by the store to buy a few things
For cleaning
And for dinner
The kitchen and bathroom are a mess
Will you help me clean those up later?
On second thought
It's better you stay in bed all day
That's where I want you
Because you're all mine now
While I was out
Getting a few things from that Darling cheese shop
The one you love
I ran into your parents
They asked how you were doing
I told them you were feeling a Little under the weather
We talked for a while
Mostly about you
Your mom complimented my bag
She asked me where I bought it
They did not know that inside
Wrapped up in beautiful Brown butcher paper
Tied up with twine
I carried your heart

From You the Flowers Grow

Warmth hung heavy in the summer air, hazy over the pond. Across the water, dragonflies danced, their wings glittering like jewels under the bright sun. Two figures lounged in the shade of a weeping willow, their pale skirts protected from the verdant grass by a thin sheet of muslin. The remains of a picnic were scattered around them: lace napkins, small china plates, and the ruby tops of strawberries. The smaller lady propped herself on her elbow and turned her face down, looking at her companion. When she spoke, her voice was soft and low.

“Camille, do you ever wish... that we could stay here forever?” She said, smoothing a hand over her skirt. “Perhaps not this location, forever. But picnicking, picking flowers, like this. Together.”

Camille sat up slowly, shaking herself out of warm contentment to focus on June’s voice. A bumblebee was bumping into the wildflowers near her feet, buzzing softly. She watched the clumsy dance for a bit, turning over her words before answering.

“I do, sometimes. But summer never lasts, not even when you wish it to, and for you... well, you know what the autumn will bring for you.” Camille said, trying to keep the bone-deep sorrow that accompanied that thought out of her voice. The bee moved on from the wildflowers, and she reached out to pick them. Pulling the bunch into her lap, she began separating the blooms into little bundles of pink, white, blue, yellow. June was silent at her side, but turned away as her cheeks colored pink. A slight breeze picked up and the pond began to lap at the banks, rippling jade.

“You’ve known me since we were just girls.” June said, interrupting the stillness. “You know I- I am scared. Every morning my mother finds me at breakfast, talking on and on about the bouquets, the lace, the guest list and I’m-” she stopped, her hands clenched in the fabric of the picnic blanket. Camille hesitantly reached out, the flowers forgotten in her lap, but June shook her head. “I’m not making sense,” she said quietly. “I should be happy.

I'll have my own house. Perhaps even with a pond like this. I'll be taken care of." The haziness seemed to deepen, the shadows over the water beginning to lengthen as the sun started to descend from its zenith. Camille looked at June's profile, golden in the afternoon light.

"June..." Camille started, but June kept her gaze on the distant bank and when she spoke, her voice seemed too loud in the stillness.

"Everyone tells me I should be happy, that I will be happy, but I barely even know him! I know that he likes hounds and that his family is wealthy and that he likes the way my hair curls but that is *all* I truly know. How am I to marry a man who doesn't know me? How am I to be happy knowing that I can never again spend summers like this? Without you?" June said, turning suddenly to face Camille. Wisps of hair were falling from under her woven hat to frame her face, and her sea-glass eyes were bright with unshed tears.

Camille sighed gently and turned to face June, accidentally scattering wildflowers across the blanket. She picked them up again, one by one, possible words of comfort tangled up in her own feelings. In the silence, the heaviness of June's emotion loomed; the gentle breeze had left and the air seemed poised in waiting. June let herself fall back on the blanket, narrowly avoiding the delicate china plates and discarded linen napkins. Camille quietly gathered up the picnic supplies, placing them into the wicker basket before laying down next to June. Their shoulders bumped, gently.

"You are the only child, June. Your mother, your father- they are relying on you." Camille said, watching the sunlight filter through the leaves above their heads. June shifted beside her, but didn't respond. Somewhere to the left, a bird called out over the water. After a moment of stillness, there was a softer response, a slight shift of the original melody. In the quiet of the shade, June slipped her hand into Camille's, dainty and cool. Camille's fingers tightened around the remaining wildflowers in her other hand, almost crushing their delicate petals.

"Do you remember when I kissed you?" June said.

"I- Oh, June, that was so long ago..."

“And we- I laughed it off. Yes. And I told you that I was just... being silly. Playing pretend.”

Camille breathed in, breathed out, felt June’s hand heavy in her own. The wildflowers had fallen from her hand now and lay scattered over the blanket, where another lazy bumblebee was now investigating. Her chest felt taut, as though something there was trying to escape, something unknown and unnamable. She could feel June’s eyes on her, but she was unsure how to respond.

“Camille...” June whispered, hesitant.

“You are getting *married*. You are leaving things behind, June. You must.”

The warmth of June’s shoulder pulled away, leaving a cool spot. Camille let her eyes fall shut, the bright spots of sunlight continuing to flash behind her eyelids. She could still feel June close to her, the warmth and familiarity of her presence. With her eyes closed, the pressure in Camille’s chest felt more familiar. It reminded her of winter days in the snow as a child, picking flowers in the garden to give as a gift, of June’s hair in an autumn sunset. Of June’s soft hands, the pale pink fabric she always chose for her dresses, the faint constellations of freckles scattered across her cheeks.

It reminded her of June.

“What is this feeling?” Camille said softly, putting her free hand up to the neckline of her dress. She kept her eyes closed, safe in the darkness. June’s hand was still in hers, and she pressed their palms together, afraid.

When June spoke, her voice was almost inaudible. “Maybe it’s love.”

The breeze picked back up again, rustling the picnic blanket and sending ripples over the pond. The wildflowers on the blanket tumbled down the grass like pastel beads dropped from a broken necklace, and the weeping willow swayed overhead. Camille opened her eyes, blinking in the light. June was sitting up, unmoving, turned away from Camille to face the water. With her golden curls tumbling down, her figure backlit by the sun, she was radiant as an angel. Camille, unable to stop herself, reached out to June’s shoulder, her waist. June turned instantly, her eyes wide. “Camille,” she said

carefully, “I don’t want to force anything upon you-”

“I don’t know anything about this, but I know you,” Camille said. “I know you.” She stared at June, who still seemed to glow honey gold in the light. The crickets were beginning the first movement of their evening symphony, yet the space under the weeping willow seemed immune to the relentless approach of time. Camille hesitantly placed her hand on June’s cheek, feeling as though liquid fire was running through her veins. There was a suspended moment of space before June’s lips met hers, and all Camille knew was the delicate fabric of June’s dress in her hands and the smell of wild grass. The wildflowers swayed on their stems around the white blanket. The soft croak of a frog broke Camille and June apart, and there was shyness, a new delicacy woven into the negative space between their bodies. A heron glided low over the pond, silent as the coming night.

“Camille...” June said, her voice reverent. Her hands were still on Camille’s burning cheeks. “Oh, darling. Camille.”

“You say my name as though it’s a prayer.” Camille said, feeling as if she was underwater. Everything seemed distant, the calling of songbirds muffled and the crickets a low hum. The sun was beginning to descend into the tree line, hazy and bright. June’s face, however, was clear in Camille’s vision, round cheeks flushed rose. The swaying shadow of willow tree leaves fell across their dresses, an endlessly shifting tapestry that blurred in front of Camille’s eyes.

“I can say it like that for eternity, if you would like. Camille, Camille. Camille. My angel.” June said. She smiled softly, turning away to pick a single daisy out of the riot of wildflowers. As she tucked it into Camille’s hand, she kissed each finger. Camille turned away, breathless, looking into the brilliant reflection of the sun on the water.

“June, I... Dusk is coming. Autumn is coming.” Camille said. “There has to be an end to all things.”

June placed a gentle hand on Camille’s cheek, guiding her until they were only a breath apart. “Can you not see it, Camille? We are safe here. We have this,” she said, gesturing out over the glimmering pond, the wildflowers, the hidden haven of the weeping willow. “We will always have this.”

Noah McAlister

That the Light was Already There

Into darkness, the light once breathed, you dreamed,
Like a shivered-out steam from the lips,
Its heavy hefts wafted through the silence.

I liked to paint the cynical instance,
When God came and went,
When he spent all his efforts to build
A home set deep in the cold,
Then he left when it had gone to shit—
And this was what we were left with.

We couldn't have agreed,
Bent to the curve of our beliefs.
We could have fallen for conversions,
But we wouldn't have been together.
Could we have cared to share
The warmth with one another?

I want to believe
That the light was already there,
With the darkness, and the fear,
And the love, golden-thin, through it all.

Jonathon Crump

Sonnet 2

Like poets past I first could praise your eyes.
Perhaps compare those gems to sea or moon,
And next your golden hair my pen could size,
Which shimmers brighter than the sun at noon.
Then liken next your skin to softest silk;
Your grace to dancing, delicate and strong;
Your rosy cheeks to flowers in that ilk;
Your lips to sweetest fruits, your laugh a song.
And yet, your eyes exceed the sea's expanse,
Your hair outshines the sunshine's radiant hue,
You spoil wonders once I wished to glance,
So what on Earth could I compare to you?
 My work is futile, trying to contain,
 Your peerless beauty, Love, in rhyme and strain.

Michelle Thomas

Vulnerability is Like a Bandage

Today my appetite for love is deep.
I may require a kiss to start my heart.
Ignore my cries that break my soul in half.
I long to be the music of your life.

The endless thoughts that soar, is just my way.
Deciding what to wear again is hard.
From short to long, I wonder who to be.
Although, I long to be my one true self.

My heart is rushing. Ding! Is that the man
I have decided may begin my heart
to palpitate again? Embracing just
begins to give an explanation now.

Old-fashioned love that comes upon my face.
Undo the honor. Clever he must be.
That appetite of mine today is strong. Extending love another time
is hard.

He comes in strong. He pulls the strings my heart
does hide for long. His love is quick. So quick,
I almost run away. But no, I let
myself be happy knowing love resides.

If explanation starts with truth, you'll find
I married him. I was afraid to love
him dearly. Bam! I fell so hard, I know.
But friends, a heart can only mend with love.

Jenna Elizabeth Manley

and they are love

according to ancient greek philosophers,
there are four types of love:
storge, *philia*, *eros*, and *agape*.

storge is your mother kissing your cheek after tucking you into bed.
it is your father ruffling your hair and saying “good job,” even though your team lost the game.
it is your sibling apologizing after an argument.
it is your pet nuzzling your hand,
and it is love.

philia is getting fast food with your friends at night while avoiding responsibilities.
it is letting your best friend draw on your skin and hoping they don't draw anything too embarrassing.
it is the radio being turned up as loud as possible, with each of you singing (shouting) the lyrics on long car rides.
it is the exhausted groans of your friends after a horrible pun,
and it is love.

eros is the fire that burns in your gut,
and the smoke from it rises to your eyes and clouds your judgement.
it is your hands fumbling in the dark after a nightmare, looking to clutch the hands of your partner.
it is being smothered in kisses on your forehead, cheeks, nose, and lips.
it is the rose put in your hand on the fourteenth of february,
and it is love.

agape is helping someone you don't know up from the ground after a fall.

it is the woman at the meal center doling out bowls of soup for those that need it.

it is a father shielding his children from an accident.

it is knowing that every living thing has a purpose,
and it is love.

the greeks called these feelings *storge*, *philia*, *eros*, and *agape*,
and they are love.

Haven Jock

Garden

My dear, you've planted roses in my chest.
And when they bloom, I find I cannot breathe.
I choke around the blossoms in my throat.
My love: why do you water faithfully?

The wreckage of my lungs concedes to thorns,
Each breath a toil that blurs my countenance.
Though tender were the moments in your arms
The hold became a grave that you attend.

The hands that once caressed and held my cheek
Now prune away the parts that you despise,
And trim the vile formations from my brain.
The garden of my mind is yours to judge.

I'm silenced by perennials you keep.
The petals fill my mouth and as I speak,
Their poison sweet upon my tongue, they fall
and slowly wind down to the fragrant earth.

How diligently flies will feed the vines
That wind around my heart, ensnaring vice.
The more I struggle, labor, gasp for air,
The more the ivy wraps me in its grasp.

The rot coagulates behind my eyes.
Decay becomes the only thing I see.
The fertilizer churned of my remains
Will feed the next that in your greenhouse wakes.

The Legacy

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