

SCORCHED ALTAR:
SELECTED POEMS & STORIES 2007-2014

KRISTINA MARIE DARLING

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by Kristina Marie Darling

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131 Euclid Ave
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Editor@blazevox.org



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from NIGHT SONGS

"I WAS LIT AS IF FROM THE INSIDE"

But the room stayed dark. I'd noticed the cellist's luminous cufflinks, the uncanny whiteness of his shirt. As the concert ended, I heard nothing but his music, & the cold night pulled each silver pin from her hair. That was when the curtain fell. The audience could only murmur before its folds of dusty velvet. Outside, the evening had been opened like a black umbrella.

THE CELLO

On nights like this I would play my cello, the snow like tinfoil under a phosphorescent moon. Before I knew it, you were there, with your handkerchiefs and your melancholia. The light on my windowpane, a struck match all aglow. We would take turns cradling the instrument's long neck, its cavernous belly, watching the cold metal strings shiver and hum. After each chord you'd swallow glittering nerve tablets, whispering: *Be still. Be. Still.* Its sonorous voice faded with each blue pill. And when the snow eddied and slushed, the cello safe in its towering white box, I took up sainthood to pass the time. On winter mornings my teeth still ache.

LES FENÊTRES

We drive to a window factory and traverse its rooms, the summer night pale as the steeple of a church. Behind each door, you dust locks, turn hinges, dragging your signal flares and your phosphorus glow. A yellow light catches spots in each pane as we count the saints on dim clerestories. Soon I ask, one word at a time, mouthing into the watery dusk: *Est-que je ne suis pas une fenêtre?* You turn from the work, appalled, our reflections like sand burning into glass. A porous moon stares through the doorframe. The locks say nothing.

THE HOMECOMING

Once he returned from a long trip and found dozens of dead canaries. They littered the terrace, his doorstep, every dirty windowsill, casting strange yellow light and tiny shadows. That night he tried to clear the cobblestones of their otherworldly debris, humming Dvorak and muttering to himself. A coffee pot rattled in the kitchen. Then he stopped, leaving feathers to drift in each corner, the old grey house still an homage to some other life.

CANTATRICE

He recalls painting the second story rooms, hearing a neighbor croon Tosca from below. As the lady sings, light in her hair becomes a constellation, its points aligned in the pale November sky. He taps his brush and crows fly out to meet her, flapping their hollow-boned wings. She sways from east to west. When the clock chimes, his halls loom blue above him. The woman sings and sings.

ENNUI

You walk past a crystal decanter glistening near the harpsichord. Since our guests left for the ocean, with its dark enclaves and its low mumbling, the lakes have done nothing but rain. And our dim halls become more cavernous with every evening. When I ask why the rooms buzz with damselflies, you merely nod your head. The shutters blow open and closed. Our parlor hums like trees shifting before a storm.

DEAREST V.,

Halfway through a silent film, with its dark curtains and pale women, I start to think of the cello. Did a corseted actress say your name? Did she somehow mean *eclipsed*? Behind the stage, a piano moves to lower octaves, shuddering one note at a time. And as trolleys flicker across a porous screen, I can almost hear your white teeth glisten, like little bells. At that, the audience applauds.

THE PATRON

Come in, the cellist said, showing her up a flight of dusty stairs. She recalled the thin wooden railings from her last visit, when they found canaries nesting in a corridor. Tonight, their song waxes with her restlessness, ticking like a metronome into the dark blue night. At this the musician begins to stare. He brushes their pale feathers from his tuxedo, buttoning his long silk gloves. The woman riffles through her pocketbook.

HÔTEL DIEU

When the dark green eaves of the opera house loomed above her, the old woman was right to be afraid. Because she had never noticed the hurricane lamps in the windows before, or the way they smoldered in the fog. *And tonight, she thought, my heart will empty out like a bottle of milk and drift away...* An usher waited near the door, grinning in his red velvet suit. The halls behind him were dim and twisted like the neck of a harp.

PASTORAL: IN WHICH ONE'S FAITH MAY BE SEEN AND TOUCHED

Always night, always a listless moon as we drive into the prairie's thistled heart. Around us, knotweed. Its twisted foliage, the anxious spark. His body still rooms opening within a room, the staircase burning in a locked house. Reassure me, ravenous grassland. With your endless droughts. With each of your soot meadows, their heaps of dead aster. He has yet to return the hymn to my merciful throat.

SAINT BRIGID

Or do I mean a mourning dove, rustling in the trees? Again, the harps are quiet. Ever since her miracles stopped, the sisters have wept and wept. And when the organ starts up, groaning under vaults and beams, light catches the dust in every window. Pews begin to glisten as though they were polished steel. A dark bird warbles in the nunnery while the hagiographers nod their heads, listening intently from the eaves.

¹ An exotic bird, frequently shot and mounted for display.

² In the aviary, an odd stillness. That was when she wandered among the cages, lifting their tiny golden doors. Her outstretched hands.

³ I kept the sparrow in a locked box so as to preserve its feathers, their meticulous order. The next morning a sequence of unfamiliar notes emerged, that ominous singing.

⁴ Anomaly, anomalous:

1. One that is difficult to classify.

†2. A divergence or departure.

3. The angular deviation, as observed from the sun, of a planet from its perihelion.

⁵ The documentary (c. 1986) depicts a series of attempts to enclose the nightingales. Although unsuccessful, the apparatus remains among the museum's collections.

⁶ *Serinus canaria*. Characterized by an ostentatious yellow throat. Its brief lifespan.

⁷ In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, mute Philomela is also changed into a bird. These transformations, while enigmatic, were accompanied by the same improbability of music.

⁸ Inside the box, I found a piece of straw, its dirty feathers. A gilt mirror glistening beneath the upturned lid.

⁹ "An unfinished composition."

¹⁰ See Appendix A.

from COMPENDIUM

PALIMPSEST

Chapter One Within the house, an odd stillness. That was when she unlocked the door and began wandering the empty rooms. Her pearl earring still glistening beneath the nightstand.

*

Chapter One His appearance may be read as a culmination of several recurring motifs: a journey to the countryside, her descent into madness, and the jewelry box, with its silver nameplate and tiny golden key.

*

Chapter One A yellow moon adrift as the windows darken. *And before long*, she whispered, *I'll have framed a portrait of him for each wall of the house*. She seemed to understand the necessity of the velvet curtain. Its silk tassels and lavish golden trim.

*

Chapter One Always begin by saying that this is not "Romanticism." In the work of Keats especially, we rarely encounter a clear-cut example of artifice. Like the artist's mind decaying amidst the nightingales and constellations---this was assumed to be real. And the letter, with its intricate flourishes and belabored epigraph, gave rise to the most startling numbness in every fingertip.

*

Chapter One The portrait, like a letter, requires a subject. *And only by considering the other*, she thought, *will I come to understand intention, its hazy yellow glow*. Somewhere in the picture, a declaration. The door to the gallery groaning on its hinges.

*

Chapter One Again the delicate clasp on her pearl earring. Room after room of paintings in their tiny wooden frames. A series of odes in a strange language.

NOTES TO A HISTORY OF THE LOCKET

She describes only the Norwegian variety, forgetting the French. Their intricate clasps and long silver chains.

*

Again the milky-eyed beloved. Her sense of etiquette revealing itself as innate, machine-like. Would compare her heart to the inside of a clock. Its radium dials.

*

Here Friedrich's presentation of the necklace, with its glass bells and tiny silver flute, departs significantly from Austrian custom. And still the luminous buttons on her shirt.

*

Now the locket as palimpsest. As Latin inscription.

*

When she opened the box, a dancer twirled to the same Tchaikovsky suite. A heap of charms and unsightly pearl earrings.

*

If the artisan were to realize. Friedrich wandering the fields.

*

It was then she considered the array of miniatures. In all of them, a portrait. And each of these an ode.

*

A circle of violets etched into the walls of the jewelry box. Only when she lifted its lid would the gears in her heart begin to turn.

A HISTORY OF THE SHOE: GLOSSARY OF TERMS

arch. As in the curved part of her foot, which was adorned with a slightly more delicate fabric. Near the end of the decade, diminutive heels also emerged as an appropriate accent. This unraveling of decorum became the source of her great persuasive abilities.

coquette. One who chooses attire without considering its inevitable interpretation. In this case, her shoes were intricately laced and visible beneath the hem of a blue silk dress.

desire. Synonymous with the strange or unknowable. Consider the graceful arc of her ankle, its glistening rows of lacquer buttons.

emboss. To impress upon. At the time it was expected that the floral pattern around the toe remain hidden from view. This widespread anxiety gave way to a preoccupation with her evening slippers, their endless variety.

instep. In some circles considered the most seductive part of the Adelaide boot. For a series of illustrations, see Appendix B.

slipper. A reminder of the lakeside. Her luminous hair.

tapered. Defined as a shape that fades or becomes narrow. Along the coast such embellishments became increasingly popular, and so her attire fell out of fashion.

¹ A two-act play, in which she finds the man's heart has been locked inside her sister's jewelry box.

² It was only after that she would wander the corridor, reciting each line of the sonnet. Her embellished pronunciation of its French epigraph.

³ "Even then, I wanted to maintain a collection. To catalogue, sort and procure. Perhaps I could find a portrait of him for each wall of the house."

⁴ *Intention.*

1. One's motive in acting. A concealed inclination.

†2. A plan or purpose, not yet fully realized.

⁵ The fresco depicts a series of exchanges between Orpheus and Eurydice as they ascend from the underworld. Despite numerous attempts to unearth the sequence, its last panel remains obscured.

⁶ She slipped the epigraph under his door to preserve the ritual, its mythic stature. That was when the snakeflies emerged. Their deciduous humming.

⁷ The documentary (c. 1996) follows a woman through an analysis of recurring dreams. Despite several attempts to establish boundaries between real and imagined, she continued to describe the fictional beloved. His pale hands and delicate wrists.

⁸ Translated from the German as *The empty rooms of the unconscious.*

⁹ "I had hoped to complete the collection, with its nightingales and array of glass statuettes. Perhaps even he could appreciate the infinite variety."

¹⁰ Years later, at the request of a wealthy connoisseur, art historians excavated the last panel in the sequence. Only then did they believe that the ending of the myth remained unchanged.

¹¹ Within the corridor, an odd stillness. The nightingale's dirty feathers. A jewelry box shattered on the ledge.