



FRUIT OF LIFE
Poems of Passion and Politics

The Four Redheads

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Phyllis Meshulam.

The painting on the cover is by Penelope LaMontagne.

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BY THE AUTHORS

Susan Kennedy

Susan Kennedy’s book *Dancing With The Dog* was published by Philos Press in 2004. She lives in
a one-acre permaculture paradise on the Russian River.

The Afghani Pillow

Large, four feet by two and a foot thick,
plush carpet casing worn down in patches,

geometric pattern, ochre, mars brown,
rose-russet, viridian blue, black.

More than a hundred years old, from the northwest,
the dealer told us, families filled them with grain,
put them under the saddle when they traveled,
then, sighing, he added, "You know, they never
sold these until there was some disaster —
an earthquake, famine, war."

Now it sits at the foot of my bed, vibrating
with beauty, culture, and lament.
All the hands that touched it,
all the heads that lay wearily on it,
all the children who embraced it
give it an unearthly sheen
even in the dark
as I lie awake knowing that now
my country brings another disaster,
bombings that kill thousands,
looking for a few.

To be allied with murder:
this is my disaster.

In Another Life

"We all to some extent meet again and again the same people and certainly in some cases form a family of two or three or more persons who come together life after life until all passionate relations are exhausted, the child of one life, the husband, wife, sister, brother of the next."

From *A Vision* by W.B. Yeats

In another life
I was a temple priestess
waiting to be chosen
by a passing stranger,
you were a sea-bronzed sailor,
coming for the unconditional

free love of the Goddess,
your rope-roughened hands
skimming my fullnesses
like a rapt, blind sculptor

In another life
I was a frontline warrior
muscled up, eager to die
for a little glory,
you were the elegant general
bringing up the rear, scoping it out,
plotting the way
to get me into your tent at night

In another life
I was a heretic French witch
bound for burning at the stake,
you were the Inquisition priest,
sad-eyed and slow moving,
finally lighting my fire and, simultaneously,
the purifying flames of doubt in your mind

In another life
we were rival Renaissance courtesans,
you a cool brunette, I a fiery redhead,
one day, while lying on silk cushions,
listening to Sufi music, flirting
with the same gentleman,
we fell in love

In another life,
I was your little sister,
borrowing your great cloak
and wide brimmed hat to wander
the streets of the city at night
with the freedom of a man,
publishing my own poems,
poems judged obscene by The Church,
you were a military man,
a government official, pious,
embarrassed by my reputation

In this life
I am the Queen of Wands,
accompanied by lions,
Lady of the River and Forest,
you are the Prince of Cups,
diving down, Lord of Fire and Electricity,
King of Tattoos and Piercings —
deep in your eyes
like light from a distant star
traveling towards us
I see our next story

L Mail

it's free
no machine
or power source
needed

to reach this website
to access these files
dive deep
into your heart
here
you are at the center
of your own universe-wide web
with everyone you've ever loved

instant messaging via
mysterious telepathic transmitter

love, like light
both substance and energy
in and out of time

you have many messages

Hands

1

my car becomes a Model T,
road turns into grassy ruts,
ending behind old stone church,
a graveyard, with people,
mostly men, sitting and standing around
looking at me
a disembodied voice says
“everyone here is named Kennedy”
an old man/creature in a wheelchair
stares at me, compels me
to come and stand in front of him
he grabs my hands
pulls me to him
plants a kiss on my mouth
with his mummified lips
a kiss I do not want
my disgust and anger
turn me to stone

father
grandfather
big brother
the hands
you trusted
acting on their own
hands that hold on
even in death
hands
you loved
to speak of it at all
is to invoke
the bearded robed judges

honor thy father

obey your brother
hold your tongue
(or else we will cut it out)

hands that handed me
dollar bills and ice cream cones
stake their claim
I shrink
back into myself
wear my armor
cover my breasts
watch my butt

2

one look and I know
you are dying,
and then I am
for the first time in so long
simply holding your hand
finally without fear
without repulsion
seeing the strength and beauty
of your pale Irish/Welsh hands,
the backs freckled like mine
finally, father
here on your deathbed
no fear

Penelope

La Montagne

Penelope La Montagne lives in a tiny house on the banks of the Russian River. She has learned most of what she knows from watching the river flow, not pushing, not holding back. She is a Poet Laureate emeritus of Healdsburg, CA, 2004-2006, and author of *River Shoes*, a collection of poems published by Running Wolf Press.

Invitation

I have written the invitation
on embossed card stock
in my best hand,
beckoning the wild berries
to come and sit upon my tongue,
to dissolve into being
juice of my cells, subtle,
full of tang, ripe with surprise,
to displace the acid mulch
of experience too long lingered over
in a life where miracles wait for movement,
and movement waits for miracles.
I have a notion to RSVP to myself
that I am showing up, nothing in tow
no pot luck platter, no bottle of wine
just me, very present, the honored guest
at my own table.

Lunacy

It was the moon that woke her,
coaxed her from her bed,

onto the worn slats of the deck
to stand naked in the night world.

Bats trailed ribbons through the air,
heavier wings moved on the river,
soft silver light brushed
the roundness of her body,
her flesh burnished in shadow.

Breathing low into her belly,
she wove a vow into her breast
to hold precious the fullness
of solitude, the luxury of silence,
the blessing of things unknown—
things not clearly seen
in the fractious light of day.

One Day in Anguilla

and you are saturated with the musk of goat
rising from the earth, wafting from people's breath
it becomes the scent of sex in the afternoon
and hangs on the skin of mango
taints the sweet flesh of coconut
cleaved in two by the one-handed
swipe of machete.

On Rendezvous Bay, you walk over middens
of conch, where white gaudi bones replace sand.
You submerge yourself in the widemouth blue.
Then and only then is the scent of goat
overpowered by the brine of seagrasses
lapping around and through your legs
washing away what world you have made for yourself.
The banana boat that is your little life sinks
and the ink of a thousand tiny squid
makes night out of midday,

the soft intelligence that runs your body
slips the gears of judgment and you wonder
if land is really where you belong
or if you will go back.

Tan Pronto

Minutes ago, my hands in soapy water, I wished you *feliz cumpleaños*
resigning myself, the way grownups do, that I would not be hearing from you.
This year, you are across the border in the land you speak of as *mi tierra*,
mouthed with affection, not a sense of possession. If anything,
you belong to the earth —the way you fold the soil around a young tree,
or how, when a plant is failing you say, as if in pain, *necesita más tierra*,
it needs more earth—a cry rising up from your soul.
I've heard you are growing flowers somewhere in the mountains near Tepic.
I see you kneeling in marigolds by the thousands, an ocean of orange faces
looking to you for direction, their brash hues tinting your adobe skin
with a mask of pollen. It's your birthday, and the phone rings -
your voice now, as much inside me as coming through the line -
Are you calling to drink from the clear well that I am for you?
Is it the sight of yourself through my eyes that you are after?
I say yes to all of it. It is the day you were born,
and now as always, I am more alive cracking myself open for you.
Lolling in the honeyed pause between our words,
a metallic whir breaks in. In a foreign tongue,
it says, *twenty seconds left*. I say *Happy Birthday*.
You say *tan pronto?*, so soon? just before the line goes dead.
When someone calls you on your birthday,
they want you to know they are glad you were born,
or maybe they just feel like they have to.
But when someone calls on their birthday,
it is another thing entirely. You are the gift
they have chosen for themselves. Unwrap
yourself and let the earth tremble with your love.

Rufous

When people ask me what's new, I tell them
I have a hummingbird nest in my pear tree.
My theory of everything defines this as perfection,
a reward for good living, the ultimate gift
when nature chooses you back, and makes your
yard the home place of the tiniest New World bird.
The little rufous who crowns the lichen ball
senses the nectar in me and does a wing ballet
inches from my face as I sit on the slider and rock.
My heart quickens so as to true up to that racing beat.
There is a kind of tantra in this.
Only straight on can I see the ruby drop on her throat.
All the love inside me is well met
in the whir and thrum of that manic little heart.

Mosquito Bite

The next stage of life
the doorway to the next chapter
may be hidden behind
some forgiveness
you will not give
some letter you refuse
to write some place inside
that you just can't accept.
For the want of these
you are rounding the same track
seeing the same territory
thinking the same thoughts –

even mosquitos who bite you
can taste the possibility
of so much more
if
you would do the thing
you are resisting

with all that you now are.

When

Before tree frogs began to yodel
into the night, I was here for you.
You were hard to cling to,
diving through the aurora borealis
disappearing into folds in the veil.
When you were rock I was acorn.
When you were valley oak,
I was winter sky.
Before head ruled heart
before fear fed you *forget her*
before the wolf in you left the prairie
I was here for you.

Night

The lights at Dolphin Cove trespass on my pillow
lampposts on the pier torch the ocean
sleepless fish squint at the surface.
At home, a neighbor downstream
shines light on the river through the night,
stealing the stars right out of the sky.
Security boots tranquility out of focus.
Darkness, full dark, blackest night
ferries us down to the depths
to listen, to ask, to be the mystery.
Wave your hands before you.
See nothing – go momentarily blind
in the womb of night
then you will possess true luxury, this

un-illuminated reality, this non-entity,
the last currency.

Phyllis Meshulam

Tree-hugger, peacenik, dancer, letter-to-the-editor-writer, polyglot, traveler, and author
of *Speaking in Fragments* and *Valley of Moon*.

Fruit of Life, Fruit of the Dead

for the Iraqi people

The pomegranate purifies the body of jealousy and hate.

The Koran

1

Someone taught me
to open a pomegranate
by scoring it around the circumference.
After that, a simple twist
will separate the halves,
freeing the ruby-throated seeds
from their white nets.
This magenta fruit filled with
six hundred small setting suns.

The opening of the pomegranate
could be a means to divide it fairly,
a friendly gesture.

But the division
between our two hemispheres leaves
shadows of mine draining over yours.
I wish instead I could offer you seeds.

2

The week the war began
I copied two names
one Iraqi girl's,
one American Marine's,
onto a black-trimmed badge
and wore it.
A store clerk, young reed
in a wind of our own making,
a yellow ribbon on her breast,
held me in her eyes.
Then dropped her eyes which
shattered on the ground.
Soon I had buried the badge
in my drawer.

The web tells me
that Ryan had sunny red hair
and an unruly smile.
In this knowledge, the chance
for grief and healing.

But Zaman, Zaman.
You are just Zaman, a date, a place.
I should have gone on
adopting your death and
sprinkling the little seeds of your name
over the world's ignorance.

Childhood Tree

Beside the mint
& the failed rose,
my childhood's backyard tree.
It comes to me in a dream, branchless,
shorn, as the rose bush
should have been for winter.
My father's instructions ignored,
my failings affirmed.

And yet the tree is sturdy
with white meat roots in surprising angles
and shags,
viable and stern and cramped,
like neck and shoulder muscles
holding on for dear life, for dear art.

Next to the tree,
a fence, in its humble whitewash and texture,
that could have come off the canvas of Utrillo
whom father showed me with infinities
of other riches, canvases and texts,
as he scoffed at the place-holders in the museum,
tiptoed before the visionaries,
prostrated himself before them, saying,
*We are not worthy to wash
the feet of these creators,
we are not worthy.*
I am not worthy, I said.
After so many journeys,
the tree returns to me,
its amputations, and mine,
only part of the story.
With my own arms,
I re-member this tree,
lay my head above its heartwood,
ants in my hair, moss against my ear,
accept the gift of a lobed leaf.

Templo del Sol

Temple of the Sun, Machu Picchu, Peru

Who is coming along the underside of night

who has fractured the obsidian mountains and gilded their brokenness

Only the Inca wrens

ay la dio glissando

and birds of dawn

ay la dio glissando

only the Urubamba in its gabbling and rumbling

do not stand trans-mute.

Who has thrown up camel-humped mountains

and filigreed them with green

Who?

The valley boils coolly with salt-mists

Who?

It is you

The carved-water-mirrors stand ready

The matchmakers of stones have assembled
this city

this courtyard	these terraces
this temple	this trapezoidal
passageway	
for you	

A cloud flutters prostrate

It is you

It is you
whose image we carry in our core

The very rock we stand on was once diaphanous
in your embrace

It is you that chlorophylls the tree stars

Beyond the shining blade-ledge of night,
it is you appearing,
there, there, over there

Recipes for Independence Day, Labor Day, Harvest, Interdependence Day

Organic garden opens its chicken
wire fences, offers a community meal
Long tables, plates mounded with yellow
watermelon flesh Spicy couscous,
cooled with bits of fig
Salad, flexing its freshness,
zapping the eyes with mustard
greens, cherry
tomatoes, orange nasturtiums
Stinging garlic bread
Savory squash pie, brown
as Brazil nuts, orange
as Mars Tiger tomatoes meet lemon
cucumbers
Hay-strewn paths
below, grape arbor above
Paint your face/ carve your pumpkin
Hay-bale castle, tunnels,
dungeons Beehive oven
invoking the sun with a clay medallion
Guitar duo recommends:

“Give Yourself to Love”

Voices hover like fireflies

Cinematic sky. Glance at your plate

of peaches and raspberries;

glance back at a sky of the same.

Glance again. Faster than you can shut the door on Oz,

Technicolor fizzles into black and white.

The firewood is piled up then,

Isadora Duncan released in a blaze.

Poem pigeons are lofted

first person pluralized in a collective breath

windward

Gwynn O’Gara

Jumps out of bed at the towhee’s alarm and chases the cats from the garden while goldbeak catches the compost worms fattened on tea leaves and Gravensteins. *Snake Woman Poems* and *Fixer-Upper* are her earlier collections.

Picking Blackberries

After Jake throws a rock at Christopher
and Isabelle eats some sand,
we amble down the dusty path
to where blackberries thrive.

Clumped against the slope,
brambles splayed with errant runners

prepare to give their second fruit of the season.

We have to look carefully under leaves,
down low where birds can't get,
the prickered stems rough guardians of the fruit.
Dust clouds up and clings to us.

Fat bumblebees visit a few pale flowers.
Jake is afraid. He's been stung
many times this summer.

A few berries bask green and tight.
Some wait pink and hard.
Others beckon purple but firm.

Mouthfuls burst black and soft,
the clustered drupelets releasing ecstasies
of sugar and seeds.

Leaves splotched gold
fruiting in fall
beauty gone over
and still giving.

Scent of the Pine After the Tree's Been Sawed Away

In a straw hat her uncle left behind
and a t-shirt of her brother's,
her black braid descending
and ascending her back,
an organic farm worker
sprays dirt off carrots.

After the men go home
she turns off the radio.
Wind shifts the dust.
Swallows swoop for bugs.

Business-like and gentle,
she lifts the chunky legs and
hairy tops as if it were
babies she was cleaning
before diapering.

Her mother did it for her,
and her mother before.
Cleaning what needs cleaning
in the house of the world.

A Sus Ordenes

Waiting without waiting
 alert yet relaxed

attending even from a distance
 listening with the whole body

by turns foreseeing
 and flabbergasted

retaining dignity or rolling over
 like a dog to be scratched on the belly

intent on the task at hand
 yet open to whatever's called for

later thinking
devotion humility love

Rhythm

Late afternoon the dog comes to my study
and rubs her softness against me.

Now, say her eyes.

(Even the patient know urgency,
the dreamy wake to appetite.)

Among the trees she greets old friends,
exults in the warmth of a new hand.

At home I fill her bowl.

So the heart finds where we hide
among strangers or preoccupations
and tells us it is time.

Feed what is hungry.

Air what is stale.

Pick up pen or phone

*and pronounce the words
practiced so long in silence.*

Or lie down in the grass with the sun.

*Neither bless nor curse,
simply change.*

The Uncontainable Lover

Dry lightning provokes the fire
and it weaves up the mountain,
lunging at columbine,
scorching corn lily and penstemon.

Up slopes thick with grass and brush,
it crawls,
devouring all.

The wind drives it deep into the mountains.

It destroys everything, even the oldest firs.

Roaring to the top the fire ravens the ridge
to a crater. The wind dies.

A young man smiles and hands her the menu.
The fountain gathers her in song.
She sips ice water and reviews her choices.

Around her people talk and flirt.
The music of their voices
floats like blue tiles
in the evening's beautiful design
of candles and flowers,
kindness and savor.

Suffering gave its blessing.
Sweat turned into wine.
She dips her bread in oil
and toasts the night.
Some grace we say alone.

Second Spring

All day long she sweats over griddles,
feeding everyone who shows up
with no break in sight.
Pancakes and pies roll from her fingers
while birds and fish roast.
At sundown someone else relieves her.
She goes home and cools off in the shower.

At dusk she returns to the courtyard's
other side where it's cool and moist.
Vines curl around tables.

Glass and silver shine like ripe fruit.
A young man smiles and hands her the menu.
The fountain gathers her in song.
She sips ice water and reviews her choices.

Around her people talk and flirt.
The music of their voices
floats like blue tiles
in the evening's beautiful design
of candles and flowers,
kindness and savor.

Suffering gave its blessing.
Sweat turned into wine.
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