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While
Standing
in Line
for Death

CAConrad

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“A POEM IS A ‘LINE’ BETWEEN ANY TWO POINTS
IN CREATION.” —CHARLES OLSON

FOR EARTH (AKA MARK HOLMES)

YOU HAVE CONNECTIONS STILL TO THE LIVING
WHERE MY LOVE KEEPS YOU ALIVE

AND FOR

BELINDA SCHMID & DAVID CRANSTOUN WELCH

Mount Monadnock Transmissions

for Prageeta Sharma

*Over a period of four centuries some nine million such hideous conflagrations occurred, driving Europe's women out of power and their tribal traditions completely underground. Sometimes to add to the horror and drive the lessons home further, the bodies of strangled Gay men were stacked in with the kindling at the witches' feet as "faggots" of a new and horrible kind and as a sacrificial symbol turned upon the people who had valued living faggots, sacred Gay men. —JUDY GRAHN, from *Another Mother Tongue**

Yes poetry can handle this. This is the third ritual I did to overcome my depression from my boyfriend Earth's murder. The third because the first two, while I liked the resulting poems, left me feeling just as depressed, sometimes worse. The rituals for creating poems have the power to change us in ways we have yet to fully explore, and I was determined to find the right ingredients for the ritual, and I did. It worked.

Earth had moved to a rural queer community in Tennessee to work the gardens, and he was happy the last time we talked on the phone, telling me about budding trees and the delicious smells of spring. He told me about a cave he found where he liked to meditate in the mornings. We made plans for me to visit and spend the night together in the cave. We were excited. He told me to give Philadelphia his love.

Days after that phone call he was meditating in the cave when men bound and gagged him, tortured him, raped him, covered him in gasoline, and burned him alive. The police ruled his death a suicide. The sheriff told me to mind my own business every time I insisted Earth was murdered, and he called me Faggot like it was my name: he would say, "Do you hear me Faggot?" Yeah, Faggot heard you. The police know who did it. Or they just don't care. Which is worse? My anger at the police and Earth's rapists and killers haunted my days. The coroner and paramedics, however, always called his death a homicide, which provided some comfort.

I am grateful to the MacDowell Colony for providing me with a little cabin in the woods for a couple of months to do this ritual in the shadow of Mount Monadnock. It was autumn and the leaves had started to fall. One of the ingredients of the ritual was to sit in the woods and focus on a distant tree trunk. Being patient, staring at the tree long enough, I would suddenly see every falling leaf at once. It can be as harrowing as it is cathartic to abruptly capture all motion with the eye, permitting the movement to sync up with an internal avalanche. I took notes for the poems. One night I dreamed I woke inside a tree, the wood surrounding me was a warm, fibrous silk and I could hear the sap moving inside a soft steady heartbeat.

The last time I saw Earth alive he gave me a clear quartz crystal he had carried in his pocket for over a year. After his death I put it away. It caused me pain with its psychic barbed wire; whenever I found it by accident my day would be ruined. When the first two rituals failed I knew I needed a more potent ingredient. I took Earth's crystal with me to the residency. This crystal had been on him every day for over a year doing what such crystals do, receive and store information. His breath and laughter, planting seeds in the dirt, his lips on mine, the way he tasted different in sunlight with snow, his inimitable warmth stored in the crystal's chambers. It was a little library of the man I loved.

Each morning I strapped Earth's crystal to my forehead, making certain it was pressed firmly against my third eye. Then I would swallow a smaller, round, clear

quartz crystal. This was the worker-crystal whose job was to travel through my body, pulling the information out of Earth's crystal and flooding my bones, my tissue and blood, pumping his library through my heart and thoughts. Almost immediately my body calmed, every cell dropped its head back and sighed. The stress of loving a man murdered without justice lifted each day of the ritual toward peace. When I passed the small crystal into the toilet I would sterilize it and start over the next morning. I took notes for the poems.

I found my joy again beneath Mount Monadnock and I am thankful. We are time machines of water and flesh patterned for destruction, if we do not release the trauma. For years I had a movie playing in my head, my own little invention of torment, complete with a courtroom drama where Earth's still unknown rapists and killers were on trial. After a week of ritual the pernicious movie in my head faded and I immediately began taking better care of myself. From 1988 to 1998 I had been macrobiotic and athletic, the healthiest and happiest decade of my life. Earth's murder in 1998 and the additional violence of the police cover-up shook my confidence in this world and derailed me for years.

This ritual was my Restart Button. Today my love for Earth is healthier in a world that continues to kill faggots since the days when Christianity colonized pagan Europe, burning faggots with the witches, incinerating all they had to offer the world. "Accelerant poured on victim and set afire," the coroner wrote on Earth's death certificate.

The last time I saw poet Akilah Oliver before she died we were sitting at a bar after a poetry reading and I told her of the ritual I was about to do to overcome my depression over Earth's murder (not this ritual you are reading but the first one where I liked the resulting poem but felt no better). She was encouraging and we spoke of death as a shared space with all life, and this conversation led us down a dark thread about our planet's pillaged ecosystems. In a panic I said there was no way to fix our dying planet. She touched my shoulder and said, "CA, you are about to do a ritual to heal yourself, and you are part of the planet so you are heal-

ing part of the planet by healing yourself." It made us both smile and toast to healing the planet by healing ourselves. And today I hold a glass to let Akilah know that it worked finally, "It worked Akilah, poetry did this to me and I am free!"

Of the 27 poems resulting from the notes taken during the ritual, 9 were from dreams while sleeping with Earth's crystal under my pillow. I call the poems "Sharking of the Birdcage," and I am very happy they showed me the way back to my strength.

a spider's web is
made of digested
fly brains wings hairs
legs tears pheromones
attracting more flies
dissolving us into the endeavor of love
hold me to your song it is delicious
hear you one more time in
middle of night
tooth it open
love all unloved
parts without pause
Dear Ghost flickering with
flames that no longer hurt
deflated lungs expanding
YOU SAY *They Can Only*
Burn A Faggot Once

your murderers were the last
to touch you in this world
torpid song on repeat
pulled down the
rocky slope
I hold the shirt you left behind
the bottom was
visible before the descent
hours days months later
your shirt is gone
no I am wearing it
covered in cuts
layers of dust on my skin
still confident in gravity
still sliding down when
up now feels
too far
away

7

we threw our shoes across the garden
a promise from our feet to return
I throw dirt in the
other direction
hold roots
for tree to
comprehend eviction
ordered into the colossal
where the bible is the hinge of law
drain river Jordan for
something new to perfect
get the Hillbilly jackpot if you
appear at correct location with
proper biblical
abomination
you win rape
torture
death
by fire

the men who killed you
justify your abbreviated breath
 hold this bristling maw open
 a place where I will
not allow infringements to proliferate
yelling *FUCK FORGIVENESS* in
 my first revenge dream
 punching their faces
 harder then harder
 smashing their
 god-fearing
 sense of
 entitlement
 licking blood
off my knuckles
 I woke the
 happiest faggot but
 these days am happier
dreaming I'm holding you

9

when you died
the way you died
it was contaminating
 a new danger of being lost and insecure
 but reality can never be avoided forever
at the same moment who is afraid of whom
the killers or my beloved
or guilt of my continued song
desire is not what we achieve
it's a knife often carving the wrong way
or racking it in the alchemy of a mood
I should never trade youth for
poetry's resonance of aging
but I can put every poem
 I ever wrote
 in a pile
 and burn
 them if you
 would appear
on the other side

a beautiful moving
 target is all you
 wanted to be
 you must know by now of the dark
 quiver my wan genius my aspiring
 future wilderness
 shot back through same hole
 italics slant in other direction
 not everything allows for
 indulgence analogous to
 being open by morning
 fall forward
 fall conjuring
 tell the farmer
 we cannot
 taste his
 milk but
 wish to

the weight of a
 poem on paper is
 equal to its labor
 for the verbose or
 poets who prune
 the words like me
 did they love
 any part of you when
 asphyxiating your song
 I lost a pen a book some money
 feeling unexpectedly closer to you
 I emptied closets bureaus cabinets
 grated a carrot and refused to stop
 did they love
 anything at all when
 covering you in gasoline
 what would I not give
 what would I not squander
 to be your champion loser
 how can it possibly be
 how could they
 light the match

your rapists were the last
 to taste you in this world
 their breath and
 terror down
 your neck
 keeps me
 up at night
 but which
 page of the bible says to
 burn the faggot after
 you force him to give
 you your pleasure
 each time I drink water dropped from clouds
 water they burned out of your body I cup my
 hands to catch you
 in the revenge dream I behead one of them
 spell your name on my face with his blood
 the other is begging as I choke him
 his neck as soft as your neck
 I pull him off his knees
 check for tattoos
 is it him
 is it you
 I miss you
 I love you

my need to
 attack your killers
 this is where I failed you
 I should give them a trophy
 a Faggot Killing Trophy
 they won
 Jesus Loving
 Faggot Killers always win
 how strong was my failure to keep you alive
 I am sorry coming out the golden head of
 dandelion smashing through cement
 universe expanding at cruel speed
 sorry hogs room in the stomach
 a horizon we let into our eyes
 can only finish this poem with those eyes
 smash through cement
 lonely and sick with
 glory of the bloom

they needed
 dental records to prove
 you were once you
 beat the
 force back
 time left you in
 midsentence
 wilting in the
 painting of summer
 losing mastery over the
 shell game of safety
 you lingered with
 the immediate miracles
 another false ligament
 fear rising off shoulders of their
 self-proclaimed greatness
 how it was meant in
 the front and back of the question
 the more they tortured you the
 more of themselves got revealed
 born to rape and kill faggots
DIE FAGGOT they yelled
JUST FUCKING DIE

envelop crystal swallow crystal
 thrust
 crystal
 up my
 ass to
 distract from
 ten thousand worries
 few things tire me more than
 imagining
 reincarnation
 a child
 struggling
 all over again to
 not favor war
 not surrender to greed

the spirit of
 your flowers is
 my favorite shelter
 we were in love is
 the main
 thing
 faintest green light in
 tree pulls me forward
 whenever life is
 beautiful makes
 me think of you
 carry color of the
 forest to be with
 you to belong to
 this world with
 you to have what
 we have and that is it
 yes the present
 is between the
 past and future
 but is too radical
 to be called
 the middle

I still loved you after cutting down the trees
 I still loved you as the car washed downstream
 I still loved you after saying goodbye to the butterflies the elephants
 I still loved you in a shard of light my finger in the web to
 give it back tenfold
 holding our
 gorged fragment as
 promised to
 change if we
 want change
 another evening to
 falter under
 the chrysalis
 a wayward protein bloodletting from
 unforeseen orifice gathers us to
 elongated grass-fed hours
 falling victim to
 the song in its
 silken casing

heard a library
 when I was
 blind in
 a dream
 sleep less now
 your unfinished life is
 exactly where you left it
 break inside me
 break yourself
 up inside there
 we can afford to get a jump at it
 poets can still reach into murk for it
 we slept on the roof to watch
 cloud formations in moonlight
 just feel through it
 I want you to start writing
 poems in the land of the dead
 I want you to stop counting
 on mine made up like
 you want

we asked the star when
 our planet plans on transforming ecstasy
 gingerly milking us to seed
 we only need one
 plate you told
 the waitress
 you named
 yourself
 Earth to
 integrate part
 of the star's answer
 sliding off mountainside a type of
 gravitational dysphoria
 muster every
 cell to not
 follow
 into
 that
 pitch

know
 thyself
 except for a
 small wild patch for the poems
 waiting room played a TV cop
 show from forty years ago
 the murderer would be
 out on parole now
 erect with the
 chaos of
 our time
 lingering
 no more
 over what to do
 some places belong to
 the way the dead were told to die
 your naked back standing in moonlight chanting
I Prophesize I Prophesize I Prophesize I Prophesize

poetry or another
 shovel working where
 the real America buried you
 the kind of men shown
 a table with blueprints of
 our city to destroy us
 when they
 punish us it is
 exactly how we
 knew it would feel
 places with the least warmth
 exchanged with
 places we miss one another in
 sunlight snorkel of corn silk as
 the hummingbird drinks your
 wounds away
 fuck the real
 America up
 the ass with
 the fake one
let it all be done you said
let it all be done I said

paint over the
 Dead End sign
 are police writers?
 yes they are writing into
 books our
 little cherub of
 misunderstanding
 a thinking to push us
 back into body of the
 whole
love yourself more next time
 their reports read
 stones sink as they please
 everything expands at the very end
 a lit cigarette into
 our dark hello

another poet
 apologizes at a microphone
 weakening the hull of our ship
 if you can't believe in your poems
 leave them at home until you
 learn to deserve them
 this poem this poet
 will not apologize

 I'm tired of smelling my dead boyfriend
 his swimming arms lost to my bed
 it hurts to admit I love being alive
 I broke and those pieces broke
 and those pieces crushed to powder
 things to avoid saying around me:
 take it like a trooper
 stiff upper lip
 keep it together
 don't let your mouth say these things
 don't let your comfort be selfish cruelty
 let them shriek
 let them sob
 don't be
 a coward
 about love

too urgent for punctuation
coping with an inferior century foaming over the rim
a smile hanging
on the face as
though it will
pay off
but then it
does pay off
we didn't think
we could open
up like this
here we are living in the
better place to know
the Mountain Throat Temple is
our uncontrollable humming from
meditating on Mount Monadnock

dear boy scouts of the
great illusion with
hard-ons for
armageddon
enemies
must not
outnumber
the friends to
prove beauty and
kindness can succeed
snicker all you want at his
asking price but come to know his
ejaculate will
rip the
back of
your
head
off

to talk me out of a sex change to
 become a nun you argued that I just
 gave a sex worker friend advice about
 which hand to fist-fuck with to prevent fatigue
 a crisp understanding in the shiniest branches
 in life after death there is every
 day harmony between my
 feet and goals
 clasp protein to cell
 assembling a cloud
 exchange a new
 vowel for our
 downpours
 a generous
 harvest of
 flowers at back
 of the throat you
 laughed when I told
 one of Philadelphia's
 faggot-hating Nazis
*If I can smell the
 cheap whiskey
 on your breath
 there is no need to
 ask if I'm listening*

this is
 exactly
 the kind
 of space
 I want to
 follow you into
 holding your little
 mute worm on a twig
 make it marble
 make it touch like tough winter
 in the next life we will have longer love
 better places with extended embraces
 now we leave the song to return to the front
 leaf closing on closeness of
 mothers in the next world
 overseeing premium
 waste of the planet
 reincarnate
 anywhere
 but here
 land on a different rim

dreamed your babies
 stretched inside me
 with a flash all their
 flaxen hair devised a
 lean into morning
 without spilling
 a note of
 cream from
 my nipples
 can I childless move into the
 breaking wave of calculation
 always needing one more
 place to be okay
 plans splinter under
 a million rusting plows in
 a million acres of weeds
 when it is opening there is a soft pressure for
 one second as I try to feel before turbulent slide to
 the cry of long-distance babies
 holding hands inside my big belly
 this is known as the sharking of
 the birdcage

every
 single
 human
 ambition
 cultivated by
 fear of death
 it is not failure
 but age you smell
 I am often disgusted with
 life here without you
 despondence
 growing sinister
 the kind of fear when you
 don't care if you
 scrape the car while
 leaving the parking lot
 getting the fuck out before
 the police arrive today we
 give love that same
 abandonment

Dear Earth it is okay to not
 roll the stone back uphill
 we rent memory storage in the world you
 left behind
 little wonder in this
 dell of broken treaties
 daisies bend under
 our slightest breath
 you did not answer
 after you died
 it is when
 I learned
 to be
 lonely
 everywhere
 between dreaming and crying
 until it calcified
 and fell
 off

it's awful without you making sound exist
 sing for me I will sing for you
 breathe and moan come on
 what was it you wanted
 us to think about after
 you died you said
ponder this
 but none of
 us can
 hear
 it
 please speak up
 nothing now but a
 medieval barking gargoyle
 whoever gave you the tambourine
 shall be sheriff of my tender zoo
 I am not here
 I am in the future
 where I have always been
 hurry back and forth
 to kiss me my
 ghost