

2024 MAYDAY POETRY PRIZE WINNER

THE FLEA

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THE FLEA

INVOCATION

Once there was a little girl whose grandfather gave her a miniature piano for her birthday. Every time she played the white keys, a white kitten would jump out of it and tell a little white fairy tale. And every time she played the black keys, a black kitten would jump out of it and read little black fairy tales. Oh, she is reading one now. *Listen—*

PANDORA'S BOX

It's no surprise that our lot didn't
bat an eye at the earnest testimony
of extraterrestrials among us we've
become so used to the absurd and

crushing weight of spectacular
news over coffee papers and after
I take out the dog no I witness the
cat no I forge the animal nature

of my soft heart onto this palate
to eat what's still raw on my plate
I am not interested in what you have
to say baby not interested in your live

stream I am trying to break out
of this piss palace but all I can do
is scroll the meaty corpus of my
grief to keep it *suspended* to keep

it like my mistreated houseplant like
my heedless worship of the classroom
alive and hung like the most banal library
poster-loving latchkey child luck-

less waiting out lunch in the bathroom
stall *stall stall* me out again like take me
with you to the stars baby take me
to your fat alien love somewhere

vast somewhere wetter maybe some inky
planet where they still tend to the plants
that will outlive them where their kind
might both caress the box and let it be

DEATH MASK :: DEBT MASK

crouched in the paraphernalia of the human and machine

the nocturnal war of want

RAMONA FLEA MARKET

So, Nat'ralists observe, a Flea Hath smaller Fleas that on him prey, And these have smaller Fleas to bite 'em, And so proceed ad infinitum.

--Jonathan Swift, *On Poetry*

1.

Poetry, like a disobedient bitch, noses around the scrap again. I frequent the Ramona Flea on Saturday, reckless and swaddled in a Floridian heat advisory. Pay a dollar entry (up from 2020) and two dollars for a borrowed shopping cart from the Family Dollar down the road. Dollars in my wallet I bought second-hand with a tip-dollar at the bar. Dollars make the trek worth it; better I haggle for a discount vacuum. I walk past unleashed hounds, lulled into a chiaroscuro of human tang. The man with the sandpaper face fans his arms, recognizes my needlessness for diatomaceous earth. I'm only here for the fried chicken, no—the little bunnies, caged, oh, no—who am I kidding? The visual feast of trash.

2.

Who am I kidding? The visual feast of trash
scrolls my hunger, feeds it glass. I touch stilled
bottles of nuclear-scented perfume scaffolded
on a plank, thumbed by my mother's love of
Lancôme Trésor. The lore of France made immortal
by her final failure to ever travel there—
gift flights cancelled when the world went inside.
A gift, perhaps, to keep Paris there—*alive*, perfectly
narrative, perfectly housebound to images on
beauty products, nostalgic for the purest never-was,
hand-me-down ideas of red lipstick and class ease from
Vietnamese generations of failed, colonial mimicry,
and thus—innovation, and thus—monstrosity.
Every cat I grew up with had an issue with fleas.

3.

My cat has an issue with fleas; they are different here. I scour reddit threads on swamp types, try different poisons, measure the length of her life against discomfort. I swing back to the sandpaper man, and he magics a five-dollar bag into my hand that I will try out like a new religion. Like religion, the flea has had a brutal and intimate relationship with human beings :: fleas smashed between sheets of music, fleas at the end of Galileo's glass. The small pest ended millions, transferring intimacies between rats and humans, though few remember the twentieth-century disease. Little fleas jumped bombs to birth the bubonic again in Vietnam, spurred by ecocide and erased trees.

4.

Spurred by erased ecocide, my photographs
in the Flea automatically upload to the
Cloud. If the enemy has a face, it is only a
simulacrum of a look—technology still never
gets it right (*the eyes*). The Cloud :: a dishonest name
whose function is dissimulation, *unseen*. And to get
to the matter of the crowd, we must think of
water pipes, fiber optic tubes, servers, and thirst.
We must attend to the minerals, air, heat, and metals
that trace this addiction to invention. The data center
and its human hunger—its computational hum
that, barely detected and suffered by few, spikes
insomnia and new thresholds for noise. A monster
is most frightening if its parts are familiar.

5.

A monster is most frightening if its parts

are familiar. A centaur is a simple splice.

The innovative waste of our species complicates
ordinary equipment that takes millennia to decay,

that exists, lice-like, in material graveyards far

away. And today, I purchase a bit of this,

bit of that: batwing, horn, tusk, pastime, fang,

fishtail, feather. I find a baby stroller

with intact wheels and consider the

stain on its headrest as perseverance,

as preservation for my body busy unmaking

death as removal, though the fantasy of finality

unspools the certitude of human undoing.

Do you see it there? Maybe?

6.

In the clouds? Maybe? Do you see it there?

Daily, a familiar drone punctuates the
sky over open-air stalls of graying hot
dogs and real dogs and sugarcane and an old
toy cash register stained the pink puce of royal
blood. Oh, color of hangovers, color of debt that
reminds us only of the permanent flea! Just enough
time for an impulse buy :: a yellowed DVD case
frames Kirsten Dunst decked out in the '90s voided
nostalgia of a doomed monarch. Like a visual flea
circus of make-believe—not of the *end* of empire
but of what came *before* its ruin :: a dream that was
decadent, feminine, macroscopic, wrapped in silk.
That the now could be already made immortal.

7.

That the *immortal-now* might be wrapped in
silk, that this end was worth it. We had a good
time out in the heat, leaving dollar-less after buying
trinkets for neighbors, playing lotto, pounding
birria inside the visual feast of trash. Who are
we kidding? We grew up in the Flea—not in the
variety of our own species, but in the one passed down
from stick-stuck, erased trees. I return to the heat of my car,
flanked by used plastic bags filled with more used plastic,
filled with storied material filling this poem, this heap.
It's a landfill love that constructs a wingless, plotless flight,
that buys another night to defer death's dogged hunger.
And above the lot, the clouds shift into sand (*do you see it?*),
emptied into a libidinal longitude of bite and shame and light.

DEBT MASK :: DEATH MASK

paraphernalia of the nocturnal war

crouched in the machine of want

CEREBERUS

Fleeing whether to be a good or bad dog—*ruff*.

Fleeing checkpoints, watchtowers, trenches.

Fleeing the salaried work of death.

Fleeing music and cake.

Fleeing the infernal watchdog capital management company.

Fleeing the desire for an enemy :: the desire for apartheid.

Fleeing the invisible hand of the border agent.

Fleeing phones, ammunition, marks.

Fleeing ambition.

Fleeing one last round.

Fleeing the desire for mythology :: the technetronic, digital age.

Fleeing the breakroom and the employee of the month.

Fleeing the multiplication of spaces for loss.

Fleeing microchips containing personal information.

Fleeing perfect security :: algorithmic orgasm.

Fleeing the fantasy of a clean state in the unconscious.

Fleeing who is who, who lives where, with whom, since when, and why.

Fleeing a duty to mourn abstraction :: money, empire.

Fleeing a duty to upload.

Fleeing a duty to guard the gates to an underworld—

If hell is where we imagine the impossible,

slip the veil and roam the cave imperceptible, *free*.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Grateful acknowledgement to the editors of *Gulf Coast*, where “Cerberus” first appeared and to RaeJeana Brooks in Florida whose horny poem inspired its incantation for an under/otherworld. If solidarity is sorcery, this spell does not come lonely. Love to those enjoined in struggle towards the impossible. Love to the memory of my mother, whose loss ended a fear of empire and death in me. Love to you, too. Come in. You’ve been out so long.