

The Lilac Thief



Linda Brown Holt

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Credits

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The Greatest Saxophone Player in the World

Thirty years ago, she married
The greatest saxophone player in the world.
Later, she wondered whether it was his
Music or the man who stole her heart,
Only to realize there was no difference.
The music was the emanation of the man.
Music flowed from him like mist from
An autumn marsh, or an athlete's sweat.
"Last Train from Overbrook" was his voice;
His whispers sang, "I Remember Clifford Brown."
Heartbeat, vibrato, soul: all one.

Even in illness, sunk in his blue chair,
Grizzled beard pressed into a thin chest,
The music rings. She watches his
Daylong silent sleep,
The slack jaw, dangling wrist.
The horn never leaves its case,
Lovingly burnished for decades
With scraps of her old nightgowns.
She sits on the floor beside him,
Holds his frail hand and listens
To the soundless melodies of a century now dead,
Recalling "Green Dolphin Street" and
"All the Things You Are."

Clouds

I wish that clouds
Were solid as they seem.
To tumble free
in their exuberant foam
Would be my dream.

To stride from peak to peak,
Glide slide to slope,
An endless child's toboggan ride
Would be my hope.

I would scoop up airspun armsful,
Set them wild in flight;
Carve a hole beneath to fish through
For the stars at night;

And when with play I wearied,
From a towering crest,
I'd fall softly backward laughing
On the sky's white breast.

Grey Squirrel

With delicate fingers
You part the earth,
And pat it down again
With tender palms.

Above, your children sing,
"Hurry! Come home!
Winter's almost here,
And we are cold."

Intent brown eyes
Shine left, shine right.
The small hands fly,
Like knitting needles of
Wild old women,
The *mudras* of
Tibetan monks.

*I must be done, I must be done:
Winter's almost here.*

The brown eyes gleam.
*I am small but fierce.
No harm will ever come.
I'll warm you
In my blanket of soft fur.
I'll feed you with a rich diet
Of seeds and fat and nuts.*

*The night will pass
And you will in the fresh spring showers
Run.*

Oct. 8, 2004

This is a beautiful place to be,
Overlooking the Delaware
Shortly after dawn.

Two great egrets troll for fish
Along the Morrisville bank.
Here in Trenton, fat trees
Gradually yield their gold
To receding shadows.

Morning traffic's sparse:
A three-day weekend ahead.
One by one, commuter headlights
Darken as the sun inches
Over the Justice Complex.

Everything is blue and gold,
Just like a Lions football game.

Perfect Spring

Nothing's more remarkable than spring,
When the dead earth, grey trees stripped bare
Sprout first green shoots in warmer,
welcoming air;

When eyes, half-numb from winter's dim veneer,
Into forests fresh with violets peer,
And hyacinths, hatched like chicks from old
brown shells,
And valley lilies with their dainty bells,
Bewitch the nose with such intoxicating scent,
I wonder—but do not ask—where winter went.

I think, at times like this, I would not mind
To die and live again, no rest to find,
If I could re-experience a perfect spring:
To live it one more day would be worth everything,

When lime-green leaves and cherry buds delight,
And tiny fiddleheads, like babies' fists,
uncurl at night.

I Thought It was a Hermit Thrush

I thought it was a hermit thrush,
Or a trio, actually,
An "Archduke," one song, three
Pairs of wings sweeping back
And forth, among the quince stalks,
Mulberry and Virginia Creeper weeds
(Lacking acanthus this late today).
Dainty lips all, snatching tiny tasty lacewings
From the jaws of all my fresh raw stumps.

One sings, two listen:
Three triplets and one *messe di voce* bright and gay
(No other small-town evening sound in sight).
Stop in the highest limb and shout: Know it all,
 know it all, know it all: Glee!

Surely the same, I grind the thick bow deep into
 the groaning
Bridge and watch the rosin spray,
Not so different from the splashing sap, the
 bugblood,
Battered by these wordless deacons as you pray.

Feeding the Cats

Carol Anne totters with 14 feet
(her own and three cats')
Across the farmhouse kitchen floor
(sun threatening light,
and birdcalls in the east).

Outside, four felines scrape
the screen door.
Mews rise like hay.
Soon the fragrant, sludgy meals
on paper plates appear.

Oh, Carol Anne, the flickering lapping tongues
would love to sigh,
Ah! feast.

Rosin

The dust blew up her nose
And made her sneeze.
Squeaky bow on rosin,
Then strings—gritty, rough—
Sending shivers down her spine. Yet
She loved the dry, acrid scent,
The amber bar stuck on its
Pale wood palette, loved
The shrill staccato glide of
Bow over rosin, rosin
Over bow, ferocious
In attack, and amber
Dusted fingertips.

Her father, orange peel over teeth,
A horrid grin (not his, but a factor
Of fruit skin wedged between gums),
Ringside; strained, muscled arms
Stretched like string along taut
Rope. The fierce, trapped eyes, dark
Pools of sweat mingled with blood.
And from the amber bar, a cloud of dust,
Acrid, like turpentine, and
Pure, a stainless crust.

His father, her grandfather (they
Never met), a stationer by trade,
All Harris Tweed on Princes Street,
Edinburgh, London,
Later New York, the violin

(In leisure hours) beneath
His chin, the tannic puffs
Of amber dust
And copper-tinted nails.

Who got the violin, the
Rosin, when he died in the Depression,
Leaving nine orphaned children,
some to die insane, others to bleed
in the prize-fighter's ring?
Why, she wondered, did her father smile
Whenever the dust blew up her nose
And made her sneeze, as though
it had any meaning at all?

And Then She Flew Over Me

(Observing a Landing at Newark Airport)

First seen in the encroaching night, your
Glittering necklace, a bright mirage:
White fiery torque seen from afar
Even before I see your face.

With such commanding presence you draw near.
Your arms spread out in greeting,
Smoldering sapphire on the left;
A winking ruby on your right hand.

You are almost here. I hear the
The rumble of your beckoning hum.
Steam like ribbons attends you, all heat.
Flocks part, as before majesty.

In a moment, I am beyond your shadow.
You land monotonously,
And I am left with dreams.

Pumpkin-Eater

Here in the hollow of a
Gourd she keeps her silence
Well. I have spared her
Windows in her cell so
She should not recall
The lark at dawn or day's bright
Beckoning beam. Hers
Is a dream of sufficiency,
Her wants all met, fulfilled.

She spins her life like a top
Clutched in a whirl of
Adequate space. Contentionless,
She floats in the moist shell
Of meat, whose flesh and seed
I alone in outside agitation
Eat.

The Closet

You reached into my small dark space and took my hand.
"Be free! Come out into the sun and dance with me."

I squinted: just beyond, a world burst into light,
Loving, creative, pleasureful and bright.

I shivered, for my space was cold and grey.
Your soft hand tightened. "Come! Oh, fly away!"

"Be everything that you were meant to be."
I moved, but unseen forces hindered me.

"Be true to self, my love, your nature heed."
"I can't," I cried, pulled back. "I'm bound by need."

"*Their* need, not yours!" you sighed.
"For once, declare your own."
I ached to leave, but I was not alone.

The clouds behind you danced. "Come with me...fly!
"I promise music, love and truth: why live the lie?"

I cannot go. My husband, family, faith
Create a context deeper than desire.
I can't let go and join you in love's liberating fire.

And so you turned away, dismayed by what I'd done.
The closet door was shut. But in a sense,
I won.

What's in the Bag?

What's in the bag?
It lies in the street:
A half-consumed lunch?
A pound of meat?

The Book of Common Prayer,
A Victorian box?
Four perfect mangoes,
Some filthy socks?

Nail polish remover,
A salmon in aspic?
The heart of an infant
Wrapped neatly in plastic?

A broken Dust Devil®,
A bust of Picasso?
Used condoms, fresh daisies,
The Lost Chord, a lasso?

Is it slimy, infectious,
expensive, devout?
Will you pick it up,
reach your hand in,
and find out?

Fox Fire

These white-footed woods,
So full of foxes
Scampering in joy,
Cold joy, and shaking
Their frosty fur.

Here where scratchy tree-sieves
Strain sunbeams fresh from dawn,
One fox halts on the edge of
A filmy foaming field,

Sniffs with powered nose
The frisky air awhile
And through each sinew,
Taut with winter's glee,
Flashes a sudden, ancient,
Recognizing smile.

Caught Kite

Wire-strung high, like a shrike's prize,
I am hollowed by the ravenous wind.
My ribbons rake across the eager air.
My skin splits.

I fulfill my definition:
I am bright, like blood, forcibly free.
Flown beyond my season,
I become the wind's own music
And persist, unexpectedly.

The invisible scavenger
Fattens on my dwindling form.
Storms approach.
Soon I shall be indistinguishable
From this hungry air.

Lucye in the Park with Violets

You cheeky thing, all attitude:
Tough, nasal, street-wise-cracking
stand-up comic,
Lovely in luck.

In passing, mention gathering
(beneath these cherry boughs)
Bouquets of sweet, sweet violets
In the sweet-smelling spring,
Small child in hand,
Beside the drifting ducks.

The Lilac Thief

It was a small forbidden thing,
But no one saw me. Sly,
Barefoot in the garden grass,
I bolted where the lilacs gleamed
Beneath a golden sky.

The stars were dim with twilight
In an air that foamed like fire,
The bush as bright before me as
Unquenchable desire.

The boughs bent low to welcome me.
I snatched with ease my prize,
And against my satin garment—
Rippling, moon-reflective—
From every tender petal did
The sweetest scent arise.

But night had fallen quickly
And I must not be seen.
And so among the dappling grass
As deep as ocean green,
I, heavy with perfume,
Slid sleek as some small silver snake,
Back to my home, and room.

Cormorants on Carnegie Lake

Like a broad flat boat,
Arrogant and dark on a drizzly day:
One hundred cormorants
Bob in the center of Carnegie Lake.

Not an oil spill or wreck, as first feared.
Binoculars pried open the mirage.
One hundred cheeky black heads
Thrown back, drinking in life.

Single sea gulls, with sidelong glances,
Sway at prow and stern,
Like Spanish exclamation points
Punctuating a dark image of delight.

So tight together, how can they move?
None comes and goes:
A single soul of cormorant
Locked in the regular ripple of the lake.

It is good to be together, friends.
Here in the water's womb,
We celebrate
Self-evident perfection.
Even on a rainy day,
We chuckle at our incredible luck.

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