

THE
HAMMER
OF
WITCHES

poems by
Kelly Rose Pflug-Back

Dagger Editions

For Scarlett; *du bist mein traum in stiller nacht*

Malleus Maleficarum

We were witches once, you and I

stealing through the dark
on cat's paws
to taste the drink
of bitter mushrooms
on each others' lips.

They found our beds empty one night
and resolved to make us
their delicate quarry
tearing through the bracken til they found us
torch light stinging
our saucer-wide eyes.

It was morning when they killed us
and our hacked-off fingers
burrowed like pale grubs
into the earth below the gallows
as the villagers all shrieked and fled

our black skirts swinging above them
like cathedral bells.

No brave man would come to cut us down
and in our shadows, mushrooms grew

grey stalks like withered fingers
pushing through
the blood-dark dirt.

Your love is a heathen rite, I told you once
in a note I wrote
on a restaurant napkin
and never showed to you.

Bride of nothing
bride of wind
and pouring rain

god is in the long bones of your thighs
the spined shadows
your eyelashes cast
against your cheeks
when you sleep

the two of us lost together
still

in this forest
of tall buildings.

For Dave

The day after you died
my son asked me to draw a picture of you
holding a blue balloon.

He said “give it to Dave, a blue balloon”
and drew a giant circle
connected
by a line
to your hand.

I imagined it pulling you up
through a cosmos
of scribbly crayon stars
and on
to that next big perhaps.

He’s seen dead fish
and birds
a roadkill porcupine one time

but I don’t think he really gets it
he seems to think you’re somewhere waiting
just out of sight
on your way to come bring us soup, maybe
like you did a few weeks ago

when there was freezing rain outside
and we were stuck in the apartment alone
all week
with the flu.

You know, I don’t really get it either
I keep thinking to myself, Dave *died*
that must be hard for him

I should text him and see
if there’s anything he needs.

The last time we talked
you asked me
if I'd been writing at all

and I'd laughed and said, who has time for that

I don't
I never have time
for anything these days.

And now here I am wishing
I could have found an afternoon somehow

to take that trip across town

and show up at your door

with a big blue balloon
while you were still alive.

Tarantelle

Every day she pulls my body from the ground
and wrings the water from my clothes anew,
cradling my head in her hands
when she takes me to the river and lowers me in.
I am born again, she tells me
its surface troubled, broken
where she wades.

She wants me to forget my name
and press my cheek into her belly's smooth altar.
She wants to wrap the bones of fish into my winding sheet
and sow me in the ground like a seed,
my skull crowning from the dirt once the frost has thawed.

In her kitchen she smooths my hair
with a fishbone comb; I close my eyes
as she paints crude animal shapes on my body
with her set of stinging brushes
blunt hooves leaving thumbprint bruises
as they bound across my abdomen
away from the candle flame's paraffin torch.

I sleep in her arms, and my shadow dances
under a canopy of powerline transmission towers,
frost-hard earth
cracking the soles of my feet like old leather.

Small leaves will grow where the callous rends
and seeps my blood;
it rains in fat teardrops
from the fanned tips of my fingers,
beading like sweat on my skin
where the flames curl and lick.

She wants to cover me, she says
in pollen and spit
dead leaves and the carapaces of insects

spilling from
my open mouth:

her touch, first the fire
that razes cities
to the ground

then shade of the forest
that grows in its ruins.

River

When you left
it rained for weeks in the town where I live
the bodies of fish writhing, everywhere on the pavement.

I held them in my hands as they gasped and drowned
houses, treetops, the sun behind its milky cataract
inverted in the serene black domes of their eyes.

We slept below the surface like sunken islands, in my dreams
and the shadows of oars dipped over our bodies

urchin spines fanning from the soft places behind my ears

your hair a moonless forest
alive with the movements of crenellated fins.

My ancestors were sea serpents, I told you once
and guided your hands to the frilled crests of bone
that still ridge my skull at the temples

coiled turrets of chain link fence,
the lichened beetle shells of cars

rising all around us
in the columned light.

Past the scrapyards behind my house
the river bloats with oil-sheened suds

shallows thick with frog spawn
mosquito larvae flinching
in the dark concavity of upended tractor tires.

On its rust-stained banks I watch the silhouettes of cranes and excavators
arch their brontosaurus necks

red sun sinking below the skyline's jagged teeth

as I walk alone along those striated lines
of fallen leaves, of broken plastic
left behind
by the receding tide.