



lupercalia

*poems*

jessa forest

## **Lupercalia**

by Jessa Forest

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Poetry Chapbook/Pamphlet

An 11 poem chapbook for...

when it gets too dark to read

when your light has gone out

when the hunting constellations crack the winter sky

when you wanted that feeling (of not feeling) and

when all I could do was enjoy the freeze in my fingers

the blind cold against my cheeks like heavy hands

## Table of Contents

Copyright

Missing

Hotel Magic

How to Build an Altar

I Love You (2)

Lupercalia

Enemy

Anatomy Lesson

Poem of a Poet I Admire

Things Tourists Love

Orpheus

I Love You (1)

Notes

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## Missing

A clean handkerchief  
wraps around grief  
like a soft breath  
of frost  
breathless in the  
approaching face  
of spring.

Your hand, my hand,  
our fingers—  
hiding from the memory  
of touching  
a missing moment—  
reach into  
pockets  
for scraps  
that are not there.

## Hotel Magic\*

pelvic bone  
demolition  
painkiller hotel  
the shattered lover  
and hunger  
intoxicated  
vertebrae  
tangled  
in the  
Delta  
night  
sky-  
dive  
THE MAJESTIC HOTEL  
BURNED FOR NEARLY  
48 HOURS  
Big Dipper  
spiraling  
catastrophe

## How to Build an Altar

You need familiar territory: a dry riverbed, the shadow of the nuclear power plant.

The roar of a siren on the air, the highway in the distance, the skull of a kingfisher and the footprints of someone you don't love scuffing—scarring the sand.

You need a stone from a hand killed in a war far from home, knucklebones that know the fractals of the arbor vitae and all the sounds of breaking.

You need the smells of honeysuckle, salt, and gunpowder. A piece of iron if you're superstitious.

Beer if you're not.

You need the oil slick iridescence of a cockroach wing and a lock of your mother's hair.

You need the cornerstone of a place that makes you feel safe, even if that place isn't really a place but a scrap of paper

or the empty air.

You need a poem written by someone you haven't met yet.

## I Love You (2)

If I cross my middle finger  
over my forefinger  
I am wishing for luck.

If I cross my forefinger  
over my middle finger  
I don't want them to hear us.

If I tap 2 fingers twice  
against the doorframe  
on the way to the kitchen, don't  
eat anything they give you.

If I touch my broken  
pinkie to my thumb  
I am wishing to die.

If I put my hand  
on your knee underneath  
the table I am trying  
to choke hysteria.

If I tap 2 fingers twice  
on my coffee cup  
the spider lilies are blooming again.

If you see me  
punching the paisley wallpaper  
over and over again  
I don't want to talk about it.

If I brush my fingers  
across my lips as I casually  
adjust my glasses  
I am begging you to be quiet.

If you run your thumb  
across my knuckles and my  
breath catches in my throat,  
I love you.

If I hold my hand this way  
the storm came in last night

and flooded my room.  
Again.

If I hold my hand that way  
they are still searching for  
your body, the place  
they say you drowned.

## Lupercalia

Last year the city ran down to the frozen river. She threw her face against the rocks, the tatters of her brain crystallized as they oozed from her broken eyes. When we found her we combed the tangles from her hair, rose quartz stained with a grey sky kept us fed for weeks.

Now, what's left of her slinks through the night like a wolf and you can only see her out of the corner of your eye.

She has not yet forgiven us for the highway stretching on and on forever, crusted with burnt-sugar kudzu and the bones of lovers who will never return.

This year I eat a salt cake in her honor and burn my tongue in the tiny campfire my mother taught me how to make when she and the city were so very young. I pluck out my eyes with the last of the winter roses and let their thorns curl down my cheeks.

Next year, when my voice returns, I will cut it out again.

## Enemy\*

A monstrous smile  
moves in the wildness;  
you said: get the quick  
victory. Take me on faith.  
Lost people remember  
the fire, the starlight,  
the luminous morning moving  
in the darkness.  
You keep talking; you  
need me doing like I'm  
told. I didn't  
really think of  
the subway, music  
like red fire, the world  
looking like the enemy.

## Anatomy Lesson

This is my arm.  
I broke it when I  
ran through the trees  
and fell.

You are not allowed to  
run. Neither am I.

This is my shoulder,  
dislocated after I bought  
a train ticket.

I am not allowed to buy a train ticket.

This is my shirt.  
It was torn as a shirt  
is torn when it meets  
an incoherent,  
violent yearning.

Look for my eye,  
it went missing as I was  
leaving the theatre.

I am not allowed to see.

## Poem of a Poet I Admire

*after the death of Wislawa Szymborska  
February 1, 2012*

I take the petit four  
of your poem and put  
it in my mouth,  
let my tongue soak it up—  
soft words  
dissolving  
soft as a  
spring weekend  
—inhale the sugar flower.  
The decadent scrim  
of icing glosses over  
everything.

The sun rises and the sun  
sets and I eat  
this cake and you are  
no longer here. In this world  
a violet grows at the edge  
of yard and street,  
efficiently crystallizes  
into another poet's  
greedy panting  
despite your vacant house,  
your supercilious cat,  
and your mouth that  
will never eat cake again.

I am eating  
cake and I am not  
efficient. Pieces of your  
poem clot against my teeth  
and I cannot speak.

## Things Tourists Love

1. We danced in the dust under bare boughs, between the bony cypress knees.
2. The city went dark, bruised. First pale green at the edges then purple with spots of red where blood burst from the rupture and the flesh left alive to suffer more.
3. Fear is a kind of god, maybe even the oldest. Fear can make of us one tasty meal despite all the hard work our parents put into the lies they whispered over our cribs about the terrible state of our bodies to gods who only want to eat the most beautiful and tender of children.
4. Wings choke the sky, fill the atmosphere with feathers but their bellies are never full. Some people think vultures are overindulgent. I think they're just really, really hungry. One day they'll eat the world.
5. A voice from the hollow, bound to the hands those who reach through the air and feel for (what is hiding there?).
6. The sunrise is beautiful like a jellyfish is beautiful and it kills everything it touches, slowly, with diaphanous, poisonous rays that float through the sky like arms extending for a cruel embrace.

# Orpheus

*...so for your arrogance  
I am broken at last...  
—HD “Eurydice”*

I fell

a bird’s cry

stumbled over  
the weight of the sky,

twisted in the air

all of mortality  
smothering us

joined the liturgy of curses  
eaten by the dead.

The cry I plucked  
from your lips,  
your frown;

a bird’s cry

I wanted you that badly

twisted in the air.

I tripped  
over your slow step,  
the kudzu vine across the path  
or something else  
equally absurd

joined the liturgy of curses  
eaten by the dead.

I had to stop myself  
from looking sooner,  
pushed the wanting down

until it was nothing  
but a whisper. Then  
the bird screamed.

## I Love You (1)

The declaration  
is so soft  
no one notices and  
when our breath catches  
in our wine-swollen throats  
we wonder how  
such debauchery  
could have snuck in.  
For my birthday  
I asked for a 12  
pack of toilet paper  
and a sturdy pair of boots.  
The first to fight  
the ration shortage,  
the second to fight  
standing still.  
We still manage to see  
fireworks even though  
they are not  
really fireworks.  
In some distant  
country not yet at war  
the arches of a cathedral  
crack under the strain.  
I make an altar  
out of pilfered bird  
bones by the river  
you will never see again.  
Five tornadoes  
touch down inside  
the cradle  
of our neighborhood,  
we all raise  
our arms  
but we cannot  
hear each other scream.

## Notes

“Found poems take existing texts and refashion them, reorder them, and present them as poems. The literary equivalent of a collage, found poetry is often made from newspaper articles, street signs, graffiti, speeches, letters, or even other poems. A pure found poem consists exclusively of outside texts: the words of the poem remain as they were found, with few additions or omissions. Decisions of form, such as where to break a line, are left to the poet.”

—from *Poetic Form, Found Poem* written for the Academy of American Poets

Hotel Magic source: The New York Times, April 2014.

Enemy source: pages 89, 146-7 of *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury. Published by Simon & Schuster Paperbacks in 1951.

Thank you for downloading your free copy of *Lupercalia*. This is the third edition of this chapbook/pamphlet. Previous incarnations were published as *Graveyard* (2016), *Twisted Myths* (2016), and the 2nd edition of these chapbooks, also titled *Lupercalia* (2018); also previously published under the name Jessica Halsey. This edition has revised and reorganized content. All rights reserved, including the right to reproduce this book, or excerpts of this book in any form. This ebook is for your personal use only. Thank you so much for reading.

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