

Pear of Anguish

Bridget Brewer

a.

The furs of the torturers were soft and sleek, and so impeccably clean. It was a pleasure to behold, even as, collapsed, you knew you would be dead within the hour. Your father, a king, had shown you what battle was, revealed to you the face of a man who can smell his own death. You wore that face now.

The torturers stalked the field and you watched them, your eyes bright, your breasts bleeding. You knew the exact number of dead around you: 10,999 virgins, 11,000 if you counted yourself among them, the former total preemptive, the latter more accurate. All of you strewn about, piecemeal, in the cold mud. A sliver of virgin near your head groaned aloud. Over the hill, a village you'd never been in burned to the ground. You knew somewhere a cow's teats were too full. A flower whose name you couldn't place bobbed its head in the breeze.

The torturers busied themselves with bodies: it takes a long time to turn 11,000 virgins into whores. You watched when, a whore having just been made, they slid their blades through another neck as though slicing soft cheese. And, like cheese, the ooze of each girl spilled out, melting into the mud. It was a real image. It was an image you could eat.

b.

I am, of course, implicating you, my love. Don't turn your head, please. You will watch what you made.

a.

They began to stack the headless bodies. Bodiless heads, left in the muck, glared at something inside themselves. A light rain fell. Your breath hitched, your blood felt hot. You slid a finger into your rib wound. It was soft and wet. It was worth a small scream, to feel the secrets of what you carried.

They approached you now. One of their hands, gloved in spattered hide, lifted your cheek from the earth.

"Little Princess," said the torturers in a tongue that was native and familiar to you. It was a kind gesture. They could have excluded you. They could have yelled at you in their brutish mountain words. You coughed a grateful medallion of blood into one of their palms.

b.

Oh don't struggle. You're boring me to tears.

a.

Hands lifted your breaking body. Hands carried you through the stinking air, forced your head into the belly of a dead horse. Your cheek brushed a bursting intestinal coil. You gagged.

"Pray to your God," they taunted. "Pray, little Princess."

They were still speaking in your language, which meant they liked this game of slicing neck cheese off a girl while they made her talk from the depths of horse belly. Somewhere, on your body, you felt a tear. A bird called beyond the killing field. A flower was left to the whim of the wind.

You opened your mouth to speak; you retched from the smell.

The *thwap* of a half-hearted spanking. The wolf-like laughter. The hardening of their cocks beneath their soft, sleek, impeccable furs.

b.

And meanwhile, we're playing our own game, aren't we, darling? The ties that bind, my pear of anguish tearing your mouth. You kneel and bleed in the chapel of my making. These are not metaphors. I can bring you to contrition, I have the tools for it, I've brought you close already. Oh I know. As you so eloquently scolded over roasted pheasant during our last supper, *I did it because I had to, I can't apologize enough, I'm sorry it hurt you, darling, but have more bread and keep loving me anyway, it was such a small thing, and now we're on our way to mending it.* We're on our way to mending it. Tell me more about mending. Or rather. Let me.

a.

While the torturers polluted your body, you thought of the way birds flew around the hull of the ship that brought you here. You thought of your mother, still a child on her wedding night, still a child when she died bringing you forth. You thought of four hours ago, when the horse holding you up was alive, had eaten grass and fallen pears in the orchard, and digested its dinner into the sloppy effluvium now wetting your hair and your cheeks and your ears. You thought of the horse in cantor. You thought of the horse using every muscle in its body to leap the stone wall, to run from the town and live in the woods with other beasts of relation. You thought, dimly, that you were soup. The black blood of you. The dried spittle of you. The cavern inside you flooded with filth. You were once pure and holy water your father had wanted to sell, for kingdom, for peace. Your body, currency. Your body, expenditure. You stopped thinking of that. The birds.

b.

This is cruel, you told me that night, shoving pheasant in my mouth as I wept onto the rose napkins. *I never tortured you. Don't twist my actions like this, Ursula, it wasn't like that at all. I was just in love with you. I was just trying to make sense of things. You wanted it, didn't you. Don't act like you didn't want it. You little whore.* Shoving your pheasant. Stuffing me with pheasant. Your pleasure in my choking on your forced, sick pheasant. And now I laugh! And now I get to laugh. Because who are you, even. And what do you mean. And what will your back, bleeding by my hands, buy me in this world. Or the next. Or the next. Or the next.

a.

The torturers dragged you out. A sac emerging from a sac. The heads of girls, the heads of your whores in the mud smiled at you; said, *Salve Regina*. The torturers propped you, doll-like, into a seated position against the horse. Your fingers stroked its coarse, matted hair. This horse. This haven.

"Thank you," said you to the horse.

"You're welcome," said the torturers, cocking their bows.

b.

Your pheasant. Your forcing. This slaughter is metonymic for you, my love: you were there for every moment. You were the tortured saint, the torturers. You were there in the horse, in the blood, in the wall. The trembling. And even before, when the ship of foreign children docked at the small town and found the roofs on fire. And even before, when the saint was sold for a father's gain. You are standing in for the whole beast of history, my love, and I carved each cut with portions of you in mind.

a.

Just before the torturers sunk their arrows into your forehead, you looked at the tower of girls before you. A ladder of headless limbs. A ladder you could climb.

b.

I'm a resourceful girl. I always find a way out of this theater.

a.

The bird froze in the air. The steam, rising from the tower, suspended like a curtain. So sleek the torturers, small and stuck in their shooting posture, their screams of rage caught in their wet mouths. Twelve arrows stationary in the cold, crass air.

Leaning on the horse, you creaked to your feet. You walked to the girl tower. You lifted your foot. A bleeding neck became a rung for your raised leg. A stiffening knee, a foothold. You climbed the tower of the torturers' whores, one headless girl at a time. They seemed never to end. Endless stacks of dead, past the cloud ceiling, up and up and up into the heart of all things. And a string of infinite hands, reaching down and pulling you up.

b.

One lash for every wrong you've done me. One mouthful of metal for every bite of me you stole. *You wanted it didn't you, didn't you, didn't you.* Such a blasphemer, my darling, my love, you turned out to be. And I the choke pear who makes you repent. How I love a righteous faith.

a.

Hands lifted your breaking body. Hands carried you through the stinking air, sprung your feet farther and farther away from the scene below. You climbed that ladder. You tried not to look down, for fear of falling. Seabirds nipped at your heels; fog stung your wounds; your shins tore on jagged bone. But still you climbed. Down below, the furs of the torturers shone, small like stars in a dying sunlight. You watched them shoot. You watched you die. It wasn't such a bad feeling. It brought a kind of relief.

You climbed. The work of your day became climbing.

You climbed to the top and you stepped out onto a lawn, green and bright and patched. You found yourself in a quiet town. Here, all the whitewashed houses glowed gold through their small, square windows. A herd of sheep ambled amicably in front of you. You fell to your knees. Your

hand passed over their wool. When they looked at you, their eyes turned to black and dribbled with peat.

A woman stepped from a house, her right arm dangling, dislocated, from beneath a white frock. Her face had the nose of your tribe. Her right hand clutched the heart of a wolf. It leaked.

“Cordula,” you replied, naming her.

An entire century grew up from the ground in the space between you.

b.

Now I’ll take the pear from your mouth. There you are. Spit your blood, your teeth, your rage. And remind me of the prayer of my patron saint? *Glorious St. Ursula, instructor of the young and guardian of virtue, help us to heed your fine example. Assist us to follow in your footsteps. May we learn to love and serve our Lord and trust in His goodness. We ask this through Christ our Lord, from Whom all blessings come. Amen.* Amen, indeed. The idea of it. “To love and serve.” I’m laughing, my heart, my candy, my sweet. You’re such a chuckle. I should look at other saints’ prayers, when my belly needs a good laugh. We should burn those prayers to the ground. The way you burned us. And continue to burn us.

a.

She’d pretended to be dead, said Cordula, beneath a virgin named Lily. Writhing upwards like a worm, she escaped in the interior of the girl tower while the torturers devoured your body.

“And the heart?” you asked.

“Retribution,” said Cordula. “You in the horse, it was the least I could do. Even if I only managed with one of them. His scream was a pleasure.”

Her eyes down: a blushing bride. A thief. A thief for you. Brave for you.

You reached for her. She led you inside.

To be with a girl of good breeding meant easy living. The fog clung to the thatched roofs. The sheep bleated into the white and lapped at the peat on their cheeks. The right kind of caretakers. She plaited your hair. She spun yarn between your upright hands. She held you at night. Her neck smelled like bread.

And if you woke sometimes, bleeding from the places you’d been ripped, and if you went to the window where the moon filled the sky, and if you wept so loudly that the sheep screamed in their tight woolly huddle—if you did this sometimes, or even often, or even every night—Cordula never said a word about it. And this was, to you both, a safety.

b.

Just one time I wish you’d listened to me.

a.

A girl of good breeding, the sheep, the moon: they were the balm you smeared onto yourself. The tingle of health. Blood trickling to your fingertips. The tear becoming whole.

The ladder still loomed. The ladder loomed always. And one night, when you weren’t sleeping, you put your feet on the first dead body and you began your descent. Cordula’s form still warm in the bed. The sheep, their dirt tears. The moon glaring her big, bald eye: *Yes, said she, to love and serve. A fine saint you’ll make, my holy daughter.*

Down you climbed. You lowered yourself back down the girl tower as one dips into a river. Carefully, your feet finding their hold. You kissed each bleeding neck. *Thank you* was your prayer. The horse was still there, and the cold mud hadn't dried, and the stink had not abated. Into your body you clambered once more. The old wounds reopened. The old skin stretched tight. You barely fit into this form anymore. You closed your eyes. You held your breath. You counted to ten.

“Again?” said the torturers.

“For—” you started to say.

The arrows pierced your tongue. They'd found their mark. So you laughed, and you laughed. And you closed the circle.

b.

I'm making the bone miracle. I'm putting me back together. And you will pay me your tithes, my love. What I am owed.

