Bavarian Wine

Often too sweet
or too dry, I
lift my skirt before
you place it in my hand
it is easier
to dance this way.

— Susan Lewis

The Serpent

My husband — that bastard — did it to me again this
morning only this time even worse: fresh-squeezed
orange juice, not the usual Tang: steamed milk floating
smugly in my coffee. As I sat up in our bed to accept the
tray, I poked him with my glance — like one of those
basketball stars whose sharp tap steals the ball back.
Only instead of a ball, all I wanted was a small nod from
my old Matt.
If I could just once get him to look at me while the new,
nervous Matt was busy, he and I would exchange one of
our “this-is-all-a-game, we-are-better-than-this, we-will­
ever-be-our-parents” looks. Then, he’d have to tackle
me — forget the breakfast — call me his “Piggley­
Wiggley” and his “Lady Godiva” and God knows what
else! We’d be all rough and rowdy in our old way,
instead of me, here, plumped-up and bored as the Virgin
Mary, alone with this tray, and this new Matt fussing
over me, unneeded.
Now it’s more of his latest: “another cup, Sweet?” and
a prude’s peck on the cheek. I understand why Jesus
tired of Martha.
“Forget it, I’m already late.” I rise up like royalty,
splintering pillows on the floor; I dump my dirty dishes on
our bureau. Matt hovers, almost but not quite wringing
his hands, waiting while I shower, dress, make up, and
find my purse.
“Try to be home on time tonight, Anne?” he begs my
back as I walk, nose-up, towards the door.
“Whatever you say,” I flip at him, but then relent —
this is a rough period. "Whatever you say, my sweet, Suburban Brie." The old Matt would have growled at this sentimental pity, but these days I need to build his confidence. So my mother says.

Matt — the devil — used to write me poems out of the middle of the night with lines in them so dark and wild and even cruel, I figured we were both damned. Poems so beautiful and bad — oh how I loved them. There I’d be, reading the same words over and over and each time my stomach hopping and my brain racing, sitting in the bathroom on the toilet seat with the door shut and my rosary beads locked out. The box of Kleenex next to me for crying.

Afterwards I kept this secret, even from my sisters. Matt and me seemed like any other couple, with our bickering and our nagging, like all couples do. Only we never were like all the rest, never all the way. We didn’t talk about Matt’s poems — we wouldn’t dare, but they were always leaping out at us from the strangest places: from Matt’s dark eyes when he would ask me “pass the salt,” or from my warm mouth when I just meant to give a small kiss; and they leapt out at us in the middle of barbecues, and in the middle of family reunions, and in the middle of evenings at our friends’ house playing Scrabble. "You are not necessarily saved," Matt’s poems accused us silently and let the Good Lord strike me dead — this seemed a miracle.

Now Matt hides rejection letters in the Bible I don’t think he’s ever read. Yesterday he wrote a sonnet: "To Annie, My Sunshine."
small way they treat him, he is learning to be grateful for nothing. His mouth works, too careful, before speaking. "Those editors are not Gods!" I scream at him. "Those words are not sacred! Just rip the dumb things up!" He hangs his head. He crumples the slips slightly, not wanting to offend either me or the invisible editors. He's not sure which one of us is right.

He is assuming someone must be absolutely right.

Of course, I've thought about throwing those rejections away myself, but I know this wouldn't solve things. You can scream and rage and cry out in all your knowledge against the sand upon which someone else has built their house — but — if you’re really going to win over the faith of someone you love, you have to be sly, and patient, even under-handed. And you have to make sure there is enough glory on your side to make it worth the while. I wouldn't want to leave Matt without glory.

Home again late tonight, on purpose, half-hoping Matt would have left my dishes on the bureau, maybe even toppled them to protest my mess. But the house is spotless as I should have known it would be.

We used to have our dinners — crackers, cheese and ice-cream, on the living room floor, in front of the TV. Flip a coin over the dishes in the morning. Now it goes without saying: Matt has set the table, made a full meal, does the clean-up.

Tonight I go to bed at 7:00, the way my mother often did. The old Matt would not have let me get away with this. He would have jumped on me, tickled me, called me "Shiver Lip" until I cried. Then he would have hugged me while I loudly sobbed it out. I hear the new Matt pattering in the kitchen, but only for a moment before he shuffles in to join me. Through slit eyes, I watch him moving cautiously in his new way. He stares at me, sadly, before turning off our bedside lamps. After putting on clean boxers, he climbs quietly into bed.

I roll over to face the wall, and he turns to face my back. He puts one arm over my stomach. We lie this way for a long, long time in the silence of my hatred.

Hours pass, they must have, as I listen, full of anger, to my husband’s breath against my neck. I am waiting with my teeth bared for him to kiss or pat me. Every once in a while he clears his throat and my fists clench automatically; I expect he will apologize for the nothing he’s done wrong.

Finally out of the darkness Matt speaks. His voice shocks me. It sounds foreign. It comes out one long growl: "Stop it now! I know you’re doing it on purpose, those eye-lashes of yours beating against the pillow — they’re like bugs’ wings, awful beating, beating, beating in the dark."

I wait breathless. My stomach hops. And sure enough, the life, the anger, begins to roll out of him, weakly at first from having been smothered for these months, then stronger, as he damns first our parents, then my God, then his editors — damning until the damnations turn solid in the air. They arch over us, cruel, triumphant — a gorgeous heathen’s canopy sheltering our bed.

A good wife would interrupt him, make him get up, write his words down, but Matt’s recent seeds of meekness have sown a serpent in my chest. I turn to him
delighted to see his eyes glitter, then I lunge. I bite, scratch, pinch, and kiss him; I hit him when he holds me. He continues with his curses while the evil clenched inside of me uncoils — notch by notch, stretching in sheer relief, to be met and matched, to be freed by the renewed strength of its soul-mate, my lover, my equal. A sinner after my own heart.

—Karen Sosnoski

periods of silence

pick the lock on a door rusted shut
take out the trash and no one believes you
the door swings squeaking like mice
but you're in
I'm jumping out to catch you
left a tie on my desk
paisley forest and sky curling silk whisper
reaching for the stairs out of your cage
every wall is too close pushing sparks
off the night's sharp edges
lying in endless chains of white like lace
pulling out my soul and stretching it to suit you
can't stop your fingers twisting
gentle anchors of bone sing life
burn streaks on their way to
the ashes cracking edges in the silence
of your wake.

—Sarah Danielson