

Dress Made of Mice

poems

Sarah Messer



Black
Lawrence
Press

... in the distant past mice could speak. Their natural proximity to the earth's surface and their ability to burrow beneath it permitted mice to gain access to the ancestors, thus enabling them to foretell events.

—from “Art and Oracle,” Metropolitan Museum of Art.

*Did you hear me come in the door? It seems so strange to me that I may
come here and write, stand beside you and you not be conscious of it.*

—the discarnate spirit of Orman Herrick as recorded
in spirit writing by a medium hired by his daughters,
early 1900s. (Herrick Family papers, Schlesinger Library,
Harvard University.)

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any beauty here is only because of t.k.—dedicated with devotion

I

Stump Speech

Never wear mouse skin. Don't point a mirror at the sun.
If you lose a tooth, crush it and throw it into the sky.
Never call rats or snakes by their names.

If a bear comes into your house in the morning, feed it milk.
To remove poison, drink from the egg of a vulture.

It's true I slept with Abe Lincoln.
I now know everything there is to know about this country.
Believe me, I carry a tapeworm for you the size of Kentucky.

When I walk uphill, I carry an arrow. If I can't
walk, I put a few donkey hairs in my shoe.

That black stone in my path is the iron house of hell.
I have always been kind to the black dog, whom I resemble more each day.

When I hear a cuckoo, I pray for happiness.
When my donkey brays, I say, "I believe you," three times.

This consoles the donkey.
When chased by wolves, I tie my shoes behind me.

If you want to find treasure at the end of the rainbow, cover yourself
in shit and ride a shit-covered dog.

You should offer, they say, your Cuisinart body each night to all beings.

I promise to give up this gigantic barge of sadness.
I will keep your secret my entire life.

Mouse Oracle

So afraid of death, you'd trust the mouse
with your future, marking which way
she weaves her nest, shucks seeds, arranges
plucked belly hair into a cushion for bright pink.
Each movement stacked with meaning, and you
are looking for signs.

This reveals a desperate side of things:
your roof is fixed yet rain comes in sideways
through windows in a room where someone
you love lies dying. You are afraid that you too
carry that sickness; your mouth, a basket
of cells, a basket left in the cellar
too long, growing roots and eyes.

Yesterday, a mouse
in the pantry chewed a tunnel straight through three
cereal boxes, moved dog kibble into shoes,
relocated navy beans into the utility drawer between
the duct tape and dull knives. A skittering, small-footed
undermining. Last night: a gnawing beside
your left ear—mice on the nightstand, unraveling
the doily. You yell anything: “hey you!” “oh god!”
but the army escapes with its thread-trail, a heart
with runaway arteries.

If you believe everything is connected,
then you believe in the prophecy of mice.
A mouse sealed in a pot of twigs might
do anything: strip, scatter, knit a roundness,

Marriage Proposal

Our love rhymes with: Cub Scout, trouble-shooter, sore thumb. Sitting in the kitchen with our fruit cocktail skin.

Who says love can't last? A little syrupy, yes, a little soft; a can of exploding snakes, yes, a dissolving Eros-aspirin. Yes,

I could be your silent auction—all that old lady furniture delivered from the house on the hill: velvet drapes, china poodles,

chintz, chamber pots on your doorstep. Now & Forever, like an interstate. Why not jackpot everything—imagine

those satin pockets in the dead ancestor's tuxedos. Imagine the cool slide of your hand entering—imagine yourself dressing

before gilt mirrors, the wool seams unthreading, the smell of wet sheep, and your hands moistening like pudding cake

on fine bone china—it isn't proper, but could you please pass me that candelabra? I need to check the laundry in the basement.

Meanwhile, try to imagine a mansion of fabric against your skin. Did I say forever? Yes, you'd better bury me beneath you, our hands

and feet tied. I want to be trapped by the cage of your ribs as it slowly sinks into mine.

The Accidental Conception of the New Century

In basements with a square of shag, support beams, view of the furnace, a corduroy couch; in brake or bush without removing the corset; in the winter of gas-tax, and in the morning there was no one left in the trundle but him; the man whom I thought I had married, but all along it had been a fake; in the back of the limousine with glass unicorns and pink champagne; or in bachelor complexes that landscape with harrow and drag-teeth; window sills piled with pizza rinds, beer bottles like sentries; places I was not supposed to be; inside his cell delivering the tin bowl and rag; his mom out of town playing golf and we have the whole afternoon until the little sister returns from the Turtle Frolick; or our eventual confession of love for each other, the ribbon untied from my throat. “Come here for a minute. Come sit over here,” patting the buffalo robe, the cold metal bleacher; my head a swirl of snow, hand brushing his trousers, the thought: I just want to be slanted sunlight passed beneath his door; I don’t want to be a highway-bouquet, hair-jewelry kept in a box. I can be tiny and rattling inside as the room grows sloppy; his mouth too big, missing my mouth, my shirt and jeans in the crack between the waterbed and the wall; nothing but straw in my hair and the sound of distant musketry. My thought: he still has his tube socks on, naked and rising from the bed at 4:22 pm looking for condoms; “Maybe Dave has some,” he says, about to walk down the hall to the port where a crowd is breaking bottles on the bow of the newest ship, and I think I will give him this present this once, as if I am the queen and he is the body of enlisted men, me with my powdered wig, wooden tooth, and Foxy Lady belt—I will give him this present, if he really wants it so bad, of myself. “Come back here,” I say, “I can show you how.”

My Life as a Puritan Bedpost

Felled from some long-armed forest, I knew nothing of cross-cut or pit, two men pushing, pulling—knew nothing of drag-teeth, November wind chained behind the pointed rump of the horse hauling me through vertical stands of my former self down cascades of rotted leaves, and then carried by streams and rivers, then barges and horse-carts, then split by a circle into too many parts—but where did my consciousness go? When did my leaf-line expire? A split-beam bought by a Plymouth Furniture Company at the end of a crooked alley. I became shapely,

bobbin-turned, yet plain enough and bought alone for a jack-bed crossed to corners with ropes and filled with bags of straw. Someone at last admired me—hung their tawny camlet cloak, their doublet of dead-leaf color over my head each night, wrapped me in their russet hose. I dreamt the brazen serpent wound around my length, I dreamt I wasn't a bit afraid, remembering Moses who lifted a snake up in the wilderness; remembering snakes, and smells and how occasionally I still thought of rain. The clothes came off, were put back on. Who could blame them? Weren't they charged with breaking the images? With cutting down the groves? I wasn't picky, and later wooden stays replaced the ropes, and then a headboard as a part of a simple wedding, then the curtains, canopy for nuptial privacy, three more posts.

Then years lost rocking in some darkness, swollen
with salt. Then years carried on a flat raft up a river
stepped over again and again by mules. Then synched
and tied to a gunstock beam in some new homestead.
Standing for years in a wilderness inside the belly's cry
of wolves and coyotes. Then blackened by coal
in a rail-bed, a tenement; then blackened
by grief when the president died. Then reassembled
in another room. Moved again. Reassembled.
Given new stays and ropes.

Over the years, I creaked out of silence, singing with
heat and cold. This was my moment, more so
than a forest. Someone put their teeth on me, then
another dead hand. Fingers wet with birth or sexing.
I banged repeatedly against plaster, again and again
for every reason.

Now all the Puritans have died. But their ghosts keep trying
to lie down again and again inside me.

The Disincarnate Writes a Letter Through the Portal of Your Body

The river opened a big book

of death for me,

I wasn't expecting.

And now suddenly script, the spirit medium's handwriting,
blowing my body back into bluets.

Clock, cold, comb, cool—

a hand restrained

by memory and material: a girl, a glass, a glowworm.

I'm all these, now—scratch music and love
like a bore sack. And how surprised you came

to speak to me just now. I will try
to write more than just hot shot

and smoke, or longing for that
summer when the moon
hung like a talcum thumbprint.

Remember? Who has missed my terrible warmth?

My human life: museum of the worthless, shriven
and soured like a white dog
always running past your window.

All I am now—

petals of nothingness, vinegar sweat-flowers
darkening your shirt.