It was a trembling

selected poems for spooky seasons

Kate Garrett

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Selected Poems for October and Beyond

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Welcome to this small selection of my spooky, magical, gloomy, or otherwise unsettling and/or ...October-y poems.

These poems are all taken from either my limited edition 2018 chapbook, *Land and Sea and Turning* (I don't know if there are any left, my copies are long gone – it was published by CWP Collective, which has changed hands and now goes by Dark Particle Press) or my (now out-of-print) collection *The saint of milk and flames*.

2020 has been difficult for a lot of people for a lot of reasons. In my personal life, things are lovely, but as a writer I've struggled, like so many others, to keep any sort of normal levels of productivity or promotion going. It hasn't all been because of the pandemic, but regardless of the reasons, I needed to do *something*. I could either sit around feeling mardy about it, or I could do something both creative and generous to celebrate my favourite time of year.

I chose the latter. I hope you enjoy your free ebook of spookiness, and remember: horror/dark fantasy/grim history/folklore/mythology/magical experiences are for life, not just for Hallowe'en!

Kate Garrett
October 2020
Ludlow, UK

Horrible misrule and tragical mischief

For one so faithful she
cannot believe a miracle
would release me.

Some jealousy, some
hateful worm crawling up
her neck; she knew my babies

never lasted longer than a day,
so when her darling son
caught fever, she said it was my

doing. *She fashioned a poppet,*
she signed the dark man's book.
Women scrabbling to earn a coin

or two from witch hunts, waiting
for spirits to show their faces,
whipping up a spite-froth

in the marshes of stale
disapproval. But when her
charges unstuck, slid from me,

it wasn't disappointment I felt
at my back on the walk home.
It wasn't the sting of anger.

It was a trembling.

For Josephine

She rode the bus, crossed state
lines. Dressed in blue on the edge
of Christmas, where no one spoke
her name, she said a speeding train
would always take her *somewhere*.

No russet splashes stained the blue
of her dress, skin unbroken where
she lay smiling at the thought of Heaven
or Pennsylvania, hope concealed
and settling in her porcelain skull.

Still no one knew her name, this blue
girl, whose lips prayed their last as she
ran for the train, ran for the tracks
and flew, just once, to land at the feet
of strangers in a station, to land in a grave

belonging to "The Girl in Blue". Here, they
say, she hangs around, stuck somewhere
between Heaven and Pennsylvania, speaks
with those who call her by her name.

Josephine "Sophie" Klimczak died in Willoughby, Ohio after running at an incoming train. She was not carrying any ID of any kind, and for 60 years after her death, she was known only as 'The Girl in Blue', and her grave was marked accordingly. The circumstances around her death are still a mystery, and as a result she's become an important part of the regional folklore.

What's done is done

She doesn't even believe in saying
'break a leg'. I fully support the godless,
but some blasphemies I just cannot take:

she said there's no harm calling a spade
a spade, and the first time she said *Macbeth*
backstage, Banquo's wallet was stolen.

People simply can't be trusted.
The second time, undeterred, she uttered
the word and Duncan broke his ankle

in the alleyway behind the theatre.
The third time she had to be stopped.
Thank heavens for blindfolds, and prop

departments with cutthroat connections.
She can't play Mrs. M with her tongue in
a jar. Of course it's a secret, but I don't

need their gratitude; it was my pleasure.
If an understudy is good at anything, it's
listening. Waiting. Reliable as English rain.

But I wouldn't have thought that flapping
muscle to have had so much blood in it.

Hope is a lethal injection

This one wanted a promotion, new
opportunities; she said more than once
you had to step on a few fingers and toes
to get ahead. It was all in her emails—
so I sent some of my own, an offer
here, a promise there. She showed up
overflowing with enthusiasm. I had to cut
off a few fingers and toes to get things
started. And how her smile melted, warm
to my touch, tallow on an old church candle.

This work is only satisfying when
you invest time, a little emotion.

Another was looking for love, so
I took my chances swiping right,
sent a few messages, arranged to meet.
(I smothered that one in his sleep; he'd
already said 'let's just be friends'—my
work here was more than done.)

Don't get me wrong: I'm no avenging angel.
They never deserve me—
anyway, I haven't stopped to consider it,
morally speaking. My own supply of hope
to crush dried up years ago, and when their
lights burn out—always twice—I get a fix
of disappointment. Hollows my belly
like a cockroach hiss, an empty glass.

Rosabelle, believe

for Harry & Bess Houdini

On a day of no importance: dark of winter, far from seances
and anniversaries, at last he gave her message through a man
who wouldn't take a reward: *answer, tell, pray-answer, look,*
tell, answer-answer, tell // a code tapped out in syllables, letters
across the stage for his encore performed between there and here
– b e l i e v e – she was waiting to accept, to say her part // one
last chance to forgive the waking walking world for everything
it stripped from him, the world in which he must have turned
to smoke, escaping cuffs and cells and chains // learn to fly,
Houdini—they sit in circles, holding hands, invoking your name.

A fire moon reflected on the water

for Shirley Jackson

When the moon goes to Pluto's house
for tea they talk about the haunted.
You sit with them taking notes, waiting.

Such unfortunate women, you among
them, raised to keep Hestia's hearth—
but some are born lucky, with Hecate's
heart: spotting evil like a smudge on a lens
from the corner of your eye
sideways in suburbia.

Mistaken mother, witch alone, giving us
the shadows in familiar parcels; you never
throw a light on when we let them out.

When the moon is in Pluto's house,
all those black dogs stop howling
long enough to listen
to your conversation.

She said there was a boy in the box

for Daphne du Maurier

and I fell hard for her black type scrolling,
rolling out the sword, the death of romance:
swashbuckling in drag, the English aristocracy
fucks a French pirate; a marriage burned
by a woman's rejection of manor and men.

Her accidental heroines, who mix
their fears with whisky and press on—

I have seen her shining in them, a heart-
glow bright between the slats of the trunk
where part of her was hidden. Now and then,
the boy uncurling: coaxed by ink and typewriter
ribbons, to splash saltwater words against their skin.

20th century suspense author Daphne du Maurier reportedly saw her personality as both male and female, and believed the masculine side she kept secret from others enabled her to write the way she did.

He was never the same after Joan died

For Gilles de Rais

Your hearth was not hellfire, swallowing bones
and guilt as you skipped up rungs from fury
to murder. If the scale of the betrayal is the size
of heaven, revenge must span the forest, the sea.

I see a forest: no discernible path, small ones go
in, become part of the tale, never come out. Never
to make sense of why they made you Bluebeard, when
you shine darker. A death in October is the happiest

death. The lives you ended were a matter between you
and God—you approached the noose like you'd settled
up at last, like the playing field was even, knowing
in the end angels and demons want the same things.

He only wanted you to understand sacrifice.
And with your last strangled breath they burned
you. And when they burned you it still was not
hellfire. It was warmth. It was light.

The living dead of Wharram Percy

The small ones are the worst:
slinking into corners, soot
and shadow silent, ribcage
still without the rise and fall
of breathing – they wait.

If you break necks, burn bones,
the dead can't find you. That's
your warning, my only advice:
never assume your kindness
keeps you safe. Listen—

the pitter-patter of plump
toddling feet brings the tap
of cold little hands in the night,
brings dirt-caked faces to kiss
your skin, blue as moonlight.

How to survive the winter
(Jamestown, 1609)

A crack to the back of the skull—
easy to break, like a bird's
with a smallish axe;
remind yourself this body

is an animal's, that your own
body is an animal's, that survival
is no crime when she was dead days
ago. It was an act of God, of nature,

and our store of horses, dogs and cats
and rats has been depleted; nothing grows
and we are an ocean away from home.

Brain, muscles of the face, cheek meat
and tongue—imagine this is a feast
of thanksgiving; imagine venison, duck,
eels, goose, flavoured with pumpkin.

See the one who stripped the flesh
from his wife, salted her into jerky,
made the sustenance last months on end—

it's easy when you convince yourself,
and the Virginia winter is dark
and your eyelashes are frozen solid
and it's so very hard to see.

Effigy

Smoke-cocooned in the sacral
end of the year
outside the back door
swaying in time
to the ale in my glass
I loop my cigarette
in the path of fire-blossoms
unfurling across
the almost-winter sky

friends have drifted
home to sleep
and dream of revolutions

alone in the rain-smouldered night
ancestral memories awaken
this unfamiliar stirring in my stomach—
like devotion branded treason
like gunpowder waiting to flash-bang-devour
like an uprising I am not leading

I can't see the stars
he doesn't believe in ghosts or me
I bide my time

When you converted to vampirism

you took me with you like a schoolgirl crush
and renamed me in her image. You carried your

halo well—a wisp of cloudlight through the pub
window when you told me I belong in the chapel

of bones, that making a pilgrimage to a town
built on death would suit my medieval fixations.

But with ink held under our tongues like cyanide
– Camus, Pessoa – we hadn't grown up. Your voice

was a needle skip around a pistol grip, while I cider-
drenched a wraith only I could see. We based ourselves

on bloodstains, never let on we'd sunbleached them to dust;
we never let on these winding sheets were lifted

from a well-mannered airing cupboard, the emperor's
new shrouds – hiding inside them with hearts that still beat.

Europa meets Zeus after the Peter Murphy concert

She's in the foyer laughing
with her friends, in her high

leather boots, iridescent skin.
His is an old decadence veiled

under white shirt, leather jacket,
a smile positioned just right—

but his scent of tobacco and honey,
slips around her, sweetest smoke

in the words he speaks; *she's a goddess*—
and he's in luck: she leans closer to listen,

a curve pushed through a velvet dress,
warming the flesh under his sleeve.

Walking together after the show
she kisses his jaw with magenta lips

and considers how she will convince
him to carry her from here.

My mother said never cast a love spell

Wire wrapped the bottle red and black, suspended on a cord, the sandalwood inside warmed by the constant drumming of my heart, fight or flight primed. This necklace called to me in the crisp of October, when air like apple-bobbing splashed against my face through the window, when my friend confided her sadness—she'd never be a child in the summer again; adulthood would come for her as the sun entered Scorpio. *It does make you think*, I said. But by then I was simply waiting—not for the best person, but the best time. And I bought the vial from a woman as she breastfed her child; her blue eyes saw through me, over the dead leaves littering her stall at the renaissance festival. And I wore it for a month, for courage. My mother said *never cast a love spell*, but then, my mother said a lot of things—a baby witch will do as she pleases, left all alone, connected to the moon phase, the right day, the new season. So I burned the red candle, cheap drugstore joss sticks, sickly jasmine, uncorked a bottle charged with my fears. Before the next full moon we drove to the edge of the woods. He accepted my offer, unaware of the illusion.

Harvest

for Loki, who stole Sif's Hair

I sneak, I reap

I am a trick of the light

light from a golden crop

of wheat-silk soft
and mine with one swipe
of scythe

break my fingers
break my toes
one by one by one

I provide, I scheme

I push you into motion

motion of worlds beneath

so panic – panic until
back and forth and back
the needle swings

damming the voice
you fear back down
my throat

Fenrir

give me your hand
he said, jaws
dripping with doubt
eyes sidelong
as they held out the bonds
no heavier than silk strands

and I knew my hand
was a small offering
as they wrapped him in chains
made of lost thoughts
made of movement and breath
made of the unseen

and all of these slipped
past his eyes, sidelong
and his jaws clenched
and my wrist ripped apart
and I knew this was a small gift
to the beast wrapped in chains.

Everyone needs a friend when the world begins to end

There are no zombies, no fires, no epidemics, riots, panic.
The cats have all survived, but we don't know whose side
they're on – my friend and I welcome them like family.

In the pub on what we think is Thursday, there's just a lot
of silence where life used to be. We've been looking
for others, finding none. We've been watching each stitch

of the patchwork we knew unravel to scraps, analysing
the undoing together, stripping away the patterns, textures,
find a stretched darkness we can easily share. Reinvention

is no longer relevant, but it goes on: we scavenge rainbows
for our hair, gems for faces, like we always did; we scribble
words in an untested order and read them out loud. Mirrors

without smoke held up to tangled stories, our wires and webs
crossed in the time before, and the ones running parallel used
as parables, revelations; the two of us, the empty city, the abyss.

These wings will not carry you over an ocean

i. *Manduca sexta* (tobacco hawk moth)

little lanterns spiral the canopy
above the door of the bus-turned
-camper-van, yellow and black—
our stationary bee holding childhood
summers in its brown-upholstered heart

little lanterns shine just beyond the camp
fire, where I sit listening for the snap of wood
becoming ash; long Saturdays exchange heat
for blue-black relief around our flames,
contained, a small sun

creatures in the trees scout for light, swoop
towards any orange and red glow, wingspan
wider than my dimpled outstretched hands,
my waves of hair wait for six lithe legs to find me –

heavy-bodied, flapping and gone, insects chasing
the night, finding fire interrupted – my memory
of golden stripes, a feathered bullet steals
my August sleep

ii. *Castillege mi* (mother Shipton moth)

she tells you some years later, on a whisk
of wings, how prophecies stay hidden
because no one is paying attention:
cloaks and crooked legs and caves –
none of these are secrets

the outline of her face in flight
seeking auras cast by outstretched
arms of galaxies – second sight
is not a gift for sun-soaked butterflies

Solitaire

Once upon a time I shuffled cards, exchanged
insights on the suits of wands and pentacles
for cups of wine and ten cigarettes.

Everyone's clarity comes in a different
package. Back then a north wind cut
through clouds of tar that wouldn't stick

on lungs too young to be anything other
than invincible. I'd tell them their new jobs
would work out fine, to make plans for holidays.

The questions they asked of a girl who walked
among them dusted with soot and salt—
they were easy to answer for Saturn's stray

daughter, who couldn't say she'd ever seen
the Pleiades, but knew the wisdom of hiding
inside a yew tree and waiting for spring.

Feathers, petals, fur, and bone

I.

Beneath the sun-captured
musk of meadowsweet
dusting her skin, holding
the heat of June, you catch

the musty scent of owl
up-close—the quivering
flesh between feathers,
a last flash for the shrew
on its first and final flight.

II.

A queen made of stars
holds a castle in the sea.

Give her wings, and she
unlocks your midnight

heart, the place you hide
the blood and bone taboo

you'd wished to will away
in a wreck of daylight,

the fur-folded guilt you
cough up, leave behind.

III.

She was young once

and the space from then to now
filled like a cauldron with violet,

mugwort, comfrey, moss; filled
with learning how to use them

and how to become infinite:

her face now lined and smooth, hair
white and dark, her shape itself unfixed—

an otter, a hawk, a greyhound, a hen:
whatever she wants to be, and when.

To the bartender on my wedding night – 31st October 2015

Please leave a drink at the end of the bar for our special guests – they might turn up late (but I know they're coming, they rsvp'd yesterday; yes, it was Mischief Night, but I trust them). You could catch sight of her crooked elbow next to mine during the Time Warp, or hear his baritone join in with 'Elvira' (after all, it's on our playlist just for him), or smell the aftershave and cigarettes while he lingers on conversations about pubs he's never visited but would appreciate. And the drink – it's for sharing, they only need one between them. It's ceremony, our annual ritual, but this year I need your help—they will take what they need, they will thank you in their way. It's not so strange for folk to bring remembrance to a wedding, though tonight it's so much more: it is a *welcome to the table*, a *we hope you enjoy the party,* an *I'm so glad you could make it.* Because tonight is Halloween; because when my love and I said our vows, signed our names, when we kissed ourselves into this partnership, the sun began its quick descent into an evening of gunmetal sky above, leaves in shades of flame and butternut beneath our feet, and their world moved closer to ours. Close enough to touch, close enough to dance between one and the other—never knowing which way around you are when it happens. The city streets are twice as full on All Hallows' Eve, and traversing town in my bridal gown I felt twice as alive, smiling among the murmuring dead. You met us with champagne to start the celebration, said my only job as a bride was to get drunk, and it's your job to help me achieve this—mostly true—but as a witch there is more to do: honour my ancestors, be the balanced host, join reverence to this revelry. So, make it a bourbon please. It's the only spirit they agree on.

With thanks to the journals who originally published many of these poems (some of them several years ago):

Allegro Poetry, Amaryllis, Amethyst Review, Anti-Heroin Chic, Big Windows Review, Burning House Press, Eternal Haunted Summer, formercactus, isacoustic, Laldy!, The Literary Hatchet, Mojave Heart Review, Pulp Poets Press, Pussy Magic, Riggwelter, Rust+Moth, Twist in Time Magazine, Vamp Cat Magazine.