

Amelia Furlong

POEMS + PICTURES



THE HEART HAS TWO CHAMBERS

CONSPIRACY
THEORY

On the drive home from his parents', we listen to a news report on climate change. A glacier in the Arctic Circle has lost one third of its mass, and scientists warn that this is the point from which there is no return.

Back home, he takes off all his clothes and lies facedown on the bed. It's July and the air sticks to our clothes like saran wrap. I strip naked and stretch out next to him, until all the gaps between us are filled.

For G

*Maybe the glacier only wants to be water, I say.
To melt in the hands of his lover
and lie flush with her body,
cool her raging tempests
and whisper secrets that ripple
across her surface as waves.
Maybe the glacier only wants to touch
and be touched,
to unthaw millennia
of twisted rock, disease, and ice
until he's something soft and liquid.*

He does not stir,
the only sound the steady crash
of his heart against the ribs.

But it will kill us all, he says, and I do not disagree.

Sometimes love takes an act of destruction.

The Heart Has Two Chambers
(c) 2023 by Amelia Furlong
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DEFINITIONS

Desecrate, you tell me. *Desecrate your body*.

We're discussing poetry, but the conversation is ripe with metaphor.

I'm already peeling pieces of me away -
ribbons of skin that fleck the floor with blood -
and yet, I commit myself to the task
faithfully.

I begin by looking up the word.
Precision of language is how I will interpret
every sleight of tongue.

Des-e-crate [des-i-KREYT] vt

1. treat (a sacred place or thing) with violent disrespect
2. spoil (something which is valued or respected)

My eyes skim over
the angry words
and settle on
a sacred thing
and for the first time
I feel Godly.

There is no definition
for my body,
so I make one up.

A-meli-a [Uh-ME-LEE-uh] pr. n.

1. I love you (I love him)
2. I want you (I'm getting married)

At yoga, we lay prostrate on the floor
as the teacher tells us we must honor
our sacred vessels,
and I cry - deep in a twist -
because it is not his hands
or these *asanas*
that profane my flesh.

When I'm home again
I sit on the sofa
watching him itemize
our household things
and think: I must hate him
to think he'd want this mutilated husk.



THE LIMNOLOGIST

I have a friend who used to study rivers. She never knew the names of streets or cities, and when I asked her for directions around the small North Carolina town where she lived, she spoke in river basins.

Consequently, I was often lost.

She was a scientist, a limnologist, and spent her twenties standing in freshwater rivers, measuring small things with long, scientific names. *They were the best years of my life*, she tells me, thirty years later, as we sip wine on her veranda overlooking the Tar River. The Tar is dry in summer, its dirt banks crinkled like tissue paper and its belly empty and aching. *We'd camp along the riverbanks, not shower for days*, she says, her eyes becoming reflecting pools.

When she married, she stopped studying rivers to become a mother. She was the only one who told me the truth. *Wait*, she said. *I have seen many marriages end*.





CAKE

I never wanted to be a bride
only a pink sponge cake
at a gender reveal
which you devour in slow,
agonizing bites
while I drip icing
on the plate.



TWO THINGS

I knew
I loved you

and that
to lose him
would be a grief
without compare
because no one else
has lost him



GRIEF

Grief lives in the forearms,
she said
and the lungs
which is perhaps why I couldn't breathe
after you were gone.

But for me it also burrows
between the legs
when I rub sunscreen
across my chest
and imagine you spent there

sperm drying quickly
in the April heat,
which curdles the milk
by the time he arrives home
from the shop.



PRIVILEGE

I was lucky.
I was thirty
before I learned
the heart has
two chambers,
that one
can die
and the body
still survive.





LIFE SENTENCE

I thought
to live without you
would mean death.

But it was worse than that.
I had to live
without you.



IN THE MOOD FOR LOVE

I told you in spring,
the air sticky-sweet
like fingers
peeling oranges.

If it wasn't love,
why I do misremember
the ending of the film?
Why am I screaming in Angkor Wat
for only the gods to hear?



YOU CRIED WHEN I TOLD YOU I'D LOVED YOU

And I wanted to say
that if
(when we met)
I'd lain
at the bottom
of an empty sea
I'd be floating
on the foam
by now.



PETRICHOR

The apartment is leaking. We've moved here to escape the rain, but when it comes, we know what to do. We place pots beneath the yellowed ceiling cracks and slot glass cups in between the gaps. Outside, varicose veins of electricity cord through the sky.

I have thrown open the bedroom window, and as I loll my head out over the terracotta rooftops, raindrops splatter my face. The night smells of burnt matches and wet earth. There is a word for this, but it doesn't convey the fecund, rotting smell of the mould that grows in the corners. He is in the other room, and I know that if I called, he would come, crack a joke, then press his nose into my neck and say something clever. But I choose speechlessness instead. This *oceanic feeling* can only be felt in solitude. You said that to me once, in a darkened bar when all that was unspoken bulged from my lips like swollen arteries. But I rejected that fatalism, swallowed back up the blood and chose resignation.

Later, he comes into the room after I've fallen asleep and removes my headphones. All night, we lie together, listening as the raindrops grow further apart.



CHOICES

I've made my peace with choices.
Except when I think of that stately farmhouse,
the one where you said we will sit in the garden drinking tea
until our hands are like the glass surface of a pond
feathered by wind.

And then it all comes back to me
(in a rush of memory so acute it winds me):
that autumn, your dark hair in candlelight,
the way I cupped my mouth to hide my laugh,
and how your hand twitched
as if to touch my back
—an instinctive movement,
a masculine reflex of protection
and possession
(oh God loving you was as easy as a reflex)—
but you restrained yourself,
as if remembering
the unspoken, unacknowledged yearning
between us.

I felt the ghost of it long after,
on the small of my back,
that spot that sometimes still hurts when I'm up at night
(worrying about money and that I drink too much)—
the same spot my sister had operated on last summer
after betrayal bloomed as pain in the lumbar spine
and we thought she might die in a hospital room
in Puerto Rico
(remember I told you the story, and cried?
And later, you remembered to ask how she was?)—
and where, even now,
as I lie awake in this skeleton apartment
in this foreign city by the sea
listening to the brass blare at the bar downstairs
and the gentle breathing of another man,
the pain still sits, patient,
slotted between where bone meets muscle meets telephone wire
as if waiting in a garden
for someone who will never come.



FLASH FLOOD

Love moved through me like a summer
rain, hot and quick,
but I was hard from years of drought
and the water filled me and I drowned.

I no longer wish for summer,
for cracks that form in rock
and cut like scratches down the back.
I no longer wish for rain.

I want only to lie at the bottom of the canyon,
my body mapped with suffering and spices
and no regret.



THE HEART HAS TWO CHAMBERS

We are prepping Christmas dinner
when he teaches me how to peel shallots.
Like this, he says, placing his palm over mine.
The outer layer comes off first;
the protective shell.

It has two hemispheres, I say
as my fingers feel between
the narrow hinge.
Like the brain.
Or the lungs, he agrees.
Me: *Or the heart.*

The knife cuts into milky flesh,
separating the cloves,
and I almost pull away.
Instead, I let his steady hand
show me how to husk the shell
to reveal the beating organ
underneath.



The end



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