

Hard Reds

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Brandi Homan

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Hard Reds

*For my parents,
who taught me to take risks,
and Aunt Jackie,
a writer in her own right.*

I

LIKE THE DEVIL

EXPLAINING POETRY ON A FIRST DATE

Is like telling the Prom King why I'm in Chess Club
but still want the corsage, the one with the tiny basketball.

Why I can name every Tri-state poet, but don't know local DJs.
A Pilot pen makes me happier than any red satin

dress with polyester loofah sleeves. All my friends
carry Moleskines. One scrawls homophones on her hand,

another taped a pencil to his headboard. We collect epigraphs,
read out loud in empty rooms. There's a library in my bed.

How do you explain wanting to die or marry yourself?
That success isn't a matching loveseat or the Whitesnake video?

I don't want to get my picture taken and leave the dance early
because my head's full of streamers and cardboard stars.

The lights are always low. It's affliction not religion.
Not once have I thought I could be saved.

ECHOLOCATION

I pulse now, once:
I want a man who can
build me new planets
out of mint and tin and
still maintain good posture.
One with bare feet
and big hands that carry
lavender in wheelbarrows
through my yard.
Hands that hammock.

I bump and swell.
A man with a wingspan
from Gombe to Galveston,
who folds me
into knotted shoulders,
all thumbs and metacarpal,
like a papoose to backboard.
Stiff as my high school
boyfriend's letterman jacket—
thick with forget-me-not.

A man who doesn't care
I'm only in love
with his overbite.

The tare between maxilla
and mandible. How his
zipper snags my lip—
He doesn't give a shit
that I'm seduced by violet.
I love the way his hair will smell
twelve days from Sunday.

Terminal buzz: I want a man
who'll never stand
for terra firma, who dangles
by his toes for the wind
alone. One who comes out
swinging. I'll soak his scars
in coconut milk, I'll heal him
with heliotrope. I'll grow
sanguinaria in my navel,
throw clover from the roof.

Decibels somersault
—*look back, look back*—
but lilac lands in the canyon
without an echo,
and I keep writing love songs
that vanish in thin air.
One day, he'll nose
my nape for blood.

RED DRESS CENTO #1

In the arithmetic of red dresses,
a red dress means go. Unlike most
vagabonds in sturdy boots and a stained
rucksack, I wear a red dress and slingbacks.

And there'll be no scream from the lady
in the red dress dancing on her own.
I had to cross the solar system
on foot before I found the first thread

of my red dress. On the night avenue
I am a brag in my red dress: *I dare you.*
It is only me, sitting in a red dress,
imbibing red drinks.

And the red dress (think about it,
redress) is all neckhole.
I put on that red dress and that is all
I ever did for poetry. A girl who sat

by oranges, wore a red dress. Sometimes
I walk though my village
in my little red dress all absorbed
in restraining myself—a woman in a red dress

is the reader's digest condensed book of love.
All my life I saved for that red dress.
The red dress crumpled like cellophane.
The red dress a wilted petal on the floor.

POEM FOR JASON RAY

A poem about you would begin with a belt buckle,
a West Texas town, a field of sweet potatoes
or peach trees that sway

that say this is how air should taste:
sasparilla, sweetgrass, foam, quarry.

It would be littered with shingles,
a lop-sided shed like a white cat
in a dark field, a weather-worn tomcat.

It would leave tools all over the house,
T-squared, weave around sawhorses.

It would be reflexive, a humor choked
with asphalt stretching like clotheslines, backseats,
the cowboy's long tendons.

It would breathe sparks, a circle of stones
itching with rusted railcars that sand

the levee of my skin, distilling it into blues:
a damp haystack, a dog's side sliced on barbed wire,
a guitar that reveres silence.

A poem about you would be in two-steps, line dances, of city
and sidewalk, the language between them, the hidden.

It would chop cedars, mine gypsum.
Be full of cinnabar dust, raw erupting knuckles
behind the bucking chute.

A litany of bathtubs and slow-leaking faucets.

LIKE THE DEVIL

He holds on to life with his teeth,
dangles it by the nape.
Tastes with the fury of cayenne
and says *hush-hush-hush*
with his hands as he drinks
wine from me like an open spoon.
He can tell magenta from maroon.
He grins like the devil,
all jump-start and red bell
pepper. Stitches me together
as if my cunt is a wound,
his tongue, copacetic.
I mend, sprout wings,
and scream things.
A firebird possessed
of the power to fly,
he shuts his eyes
and wills it so.
Off he goes.
Grunt and scruff, this
spitfire. This hellcat.
A scrapper who turns the screws
of my truss rod, straightens
my back. Names the stars
of my knees with one eye

closed, opens my gates,
faces the bull.
Olé! He's muy caliente.
Itch, bitch, and boil,
he celebrates supine
and sublime. Pins
the tail on the donkey
every time, this toreador.
A necromantic lynx who
swallows whole but plays
legato, in tune.
He follows me out of rooms.
Hush-hush-hush.
It will be all right.
He who holds on to life with his teeth
will never go hungry.