

Lay Me Out

Margaret Cameron

Margaret Cameron, *Lay Me Out*

Indented Head, Australia © 2014

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Lay Me Out

For David

Deathbed
An awkward burnt-black boat
Or pristine folded white
Or bloody tangled, straw-filled
Or sandwiched between walls
Or locked in with poisonous gas
Or swallowed in watery collapse

Deathbed, pillow sweet with lavender
With sheet, prayer, incense, candle and incantation
O deathbed of the wild, or the wrack of fire
Or pallid, grey malaise
Or day's rage and savage fever
Or bleed out and out and out
I, the phantom of mother's grief

Contemplate deathbed
I, the energetic child of suckling
The milk of sadness
I who am not a person
Who has made herself up
Enjoy unimaginable freedoms
Way beyond the walls of mother's mind

For I choose innocence
As the first, second and third pages
To ride this bed to heaven
I choose to know the world through feeling
And its brilliance, light, and a sense of wit, of witness too
Releasing words that kill the dead and wake the living
Words with wings

O poor body that I must leave
You make me feel
With your ragged wounds and medieval gashes
O sacred body that I must leave
You make me feel
O tender body, once a hero, in vainglory
How you revelled in the rudeness of health

Now struck, cut and devoured
See my name dissolving in warm tears
Come back to my arms, sweet animal being
With your purple wounds
Take a form that is breathing
And rehearse it as a hollow actor
Until what is said is done and joy is made

Sisters, bathe me if you will and turn me
In a dance that I have known
Of a love that cannot be uttered
Here where the great witnessing breath departs
And holds each being's cup
Brimful
—The last breaths are forever

The day is dying; this is the dying day
Getting weak and doubtful
It is so pleasant to feel important
But one is not at all noteworthy
Unless one is useful in some way
Let us get used to that and laugh
—The crumpled up brown, paper-bag of Monday

—That woman who once lived there
They say, the seers, that one has purpose
If only to live in the same street as another
Or cross and light another's path
But after so many days, thoughts gather around
The bottom of the wash-bin, a little bit of lace
Betrays a wish to be more and to do more

—There are sweet mortals at my bedside
Their ships are docking in the terminally ill port
And carrying mortality like a white flower
It suits one such as you, and one such as I
To see surfaces so willing to rest
O lay me down! Lay out a fragrant burka
—This shield and mesh of being betwixt us

—Where holding hand to hand
We can unwind endless time
Here in a conversation where everything agrees
One such as you and one such as I, smile
And smiling is enough to destroy doubt
And encourage love. The sun chooses to stay
How can this be?

Tears become sun-showers
I love you
It is quite sure
And you agree
But sometimes in thin reassurance
All nourishment is sucked from an air
That is made of regret—

Amid too bright visitors
Popping in for palliative care
—My eyes become shining baubles
I would shatter them
To carry with both hands, my death
In every line of poetry
Dear mortality is not in the brochure

But I will have death
With me when you visit
We will be so kind
Our silent tears will fall silently
We will cry for children,
Cry for you, cry for me
—Till the bed is sodden

Behind the white sheet I am listening
To the panting breaths of a creature
That cannot be still, shifting from here to there
O little one you cannot grasp a second of relief
Not here, not there
O never to be relieved, never to be relieved
Until it is done and hence—to pity

Dear, dear, dear, dear, dear
And dear little one
With your puncturing gasps
And grabbing breaths, your soliloquy
Shifts from here to there
O never to be relieved, never to be relieved
Until it is done and hence—to pity

Inside gobbling food on all fours
The wind is giving rise to unexpected feeling
It mimics clothes too intimately touching the house
A misery is invading; I will lose this, then that—
The ability to sit and to stand
Ticking clocks are banned when time is white
With a frightening nothing to do but gobble, gobble

Perhaps I will just grieve things
The apple and the chair
The cup and the curtain
The book and the bowl
The pencil and the plate
Their perfect beauty
Their unimaginable giving-ness

Ah but this will be a journey that is more than one day
My loves we must prepare for that
For the meaning of things changes with light
And also with food, after all it is hard
To be unhappy around cheeses and fruits of all kinds
Especially lemons, even if and especially if
I am to die soon or even sometime

As you, as you, especially if I am to die sometime
Just like you ... you, just like me
All we have is some time
Sometime and sometime I will die
And then perhaps take some time to die
Though some do not
Some take no time at all to die, but do ... die

We have time
How blessed we are to talk
Ah but perhaps you would prefer I do not use the words
—The words of *death* and *dying*
They are so full
Of a fire that burns by itself
All the way to and past the point

A fire that burns by itself
All the way to its meaning
And one such as you is thrown against walls
Where words are prisons
Where words do not carry you
But leave you behind
Burning to cinders in your ear

This is not what is real
Nothing that has value is like that
Meaning does not jail
It moves you, it moves in you
And it moves to you
It does not leave you out
It does not leave you behind

Ah yes, perhaps I will just grieve things
Corners and cobwebs
That particular scarf
The irreplaceable one
That beauty!
The one that changes my demeanour so
With a colour and a twist to make the heart leap

At the white window
I am collecting bits of things
That might otherwise be lost
In the white bay
White ships sound white horns
And arranging the world of things
A lemon makes my prayer

How could you deny me?
Simple animal that I am
Looking so longingly at you
An animal whose heartbeat cannot help but
Join in the crash, beat, whip and swell of life
Contagious life—animal that I am
I cannot help but pant: quench me

Quench me with all the fluids of being
Would you deny me a satiated sleepy end?
As simple as any day
O tucked in, treasured and perfumed
Folded in soft cloth ye shall receive
The love absorbed in baby's eyes
The gentle care of hands, the quickening breath

A top up with a snatch to catch up the rhythm of a suckling
Fingers that furl and unfurl
Going vague, so vague with heavy eyelids closing
And blessed with the birdsong of evening
O so simply a cup of tea, goodnight to thee
With honey and with love
Yes you can die on your way to visiting the dying

Shush, shush, the sisters are close
Gathering wool they suture my needs
With needles, hooks, hands, water and tears
To close by opening and open by closing
Folding sweet, irreconcilable hues
Into a mossy stitch
Cradling the most little I

The most little I ... and then I lost her
Mother, body, sister dear
Then I fell into a hollow void,
Of panic, of desperate, latching fingers
From expressionistic novels on thundery nights
You know the ones, so contagious
Sobbing in pelting wind

Frightening one such as you and one such as me
Unnecessarily so, unnecessarily so
For after a long day of piercing and bruising
Sobbing is appropriate but not this
Not this horrible escalation of fear
One such as I, and one such as you
Taking blood, a tribal fluid

Taking blood, carrying unspoken
All that is needed for travel
To great lands of furs and feelings
But what does it mean in terms of treatment plan?
Treatment plan—death by firing squad
Nil by mouth, nil by mouth, nil by nothing
Nothing by mouth, never nothing, never nothing

And deep within, deep within all my soft organs
Are sifting the too manys of everything
The cares and the woes and so much talking
Talking, talking and all, and all,
—Falling, falling away to silliness.
Isn't it lovely?
My body is an animal, it needs to curl up and rest
It needs to purr—a resonating sound

Deep within all my soft organs, that cures.
In the enclosure is a kind of stillness
Barely the swish of a tail
To clear the buzzing eyes
These jungle days are hospital cold
The pots around the bed
Are filling with internal fluids

And boats can be heard in the still night
On the dark water of this vigil
No wonder the surgeons are weeping
And once when I was falling
I felt a hand supporting my skeleton
When I woke I tried to remember
How to stand

Oh this verbal limping
The words *brave* and *kind* are making me cry
I am on the floor speaking to a *you* on a phone
Here in the middle of my nowhere
I cannot help but weep, open like a wave
Your voice presents arriving land
And I break against its witness

And so I put a headscarf on
And pretend to be a person of interest
I am walking for that is what I am meant to do
Not languish here for people and places elsewhere
After the shark is eating, after the surgeon is wounding
What is left will always be what I make of it
That much has not changed

Should I become unfamiliar enough to die?
And so I look in the mirror for a moment reassured
By the warmth of flesh
— A familiar sister there
And I am telling her not to be fooled
Only one day from death I am likely to feel like this
That she is I and I am she

I am writing agonies in the middle of a cold path
And caught in the rain like an interesting writer
I am taking shelter with a pen
In the Teatree and She oak, hurt sky, wet book
One cold raindrop, one broken poet
I cry anytime I understand what is happening
Seeing a great distance between me and life

The afternoon storm has passed
People are wandering
There is a nagging pain, homesickness
I am cold
My soul is shivering
One such as you and one such as I
Should never feel alone

And the animal body grows heavy
Deep in my bones
Taking it from my marrow
This faith I am making up
With the help of seers, this credo ...
That it is right to care deeply about something
If only to honour beauty

The colour of light, the opacity
Of things and words otherwise meaningless
That are making the world sing
How can I explain that the ordinary
Is more, more, more, more than enough
That it is holding me in faith
That the world is holding me in faith

What is breathing behind that silence?
Locked behind these sisters' eyes
The sound of footsteps on a gravel path along the thin driveway
The house, the house where he is spinning an axe
Where he is flogging a daughter to the screams of a wife and a child
Where he is knocked out night after night after night
By his own sons to keep us safe, to keep us safe

And another morning when the sea-mist fog
Is rolling down the road all white, all white,
Breaking into a day made of honey
Where all things sing
Giving me good pills
To make me better, better, better, better
For I am better now, better than before

Perhaps I will just grieve things
The wash-basket, the cardigan
The red blanket O
This day there is no line between
The sky and the sea and the thick blue paint is still
So still ... and blobbing with boats
And I have my arm around you and finally I am saying

I don't want to die
Sorry to say the obvious!
It's the bit you can't say
It's the bit that hurts
When you look at the thick blue painted bay
As the just-warm sun of late winter falls down
And your arms are buried in other people's jumpers

And you feel
Gathered into them
Best to say it
It would be a terrible thing to want
To want to die
But please ...
Don't send me horrible flowers

Shush!
I am sleeping through the diagnosis
Letting them think what they will
And we are all looking magnificent
On this morning of breezes
With bright sunlight flooding rooms
Are there no edges to glory?

Such a gentle night time breeze is caressing my body
It is barely audible, barely sensory
Sweeping across the land
—I feel so embraced
Its dominion is my soul
Indeed I would name it my soul wind
Turning me so ... gently, I barely move