



Help Me I Am In Hell

Laura Henriksen

A woman's love is hard to bear, soft
ground, cold bus, first light. Petals fell
around me everywhere I went and through
the ambiguity of this enchantment I never
knew if I was cursed or saved. Beholding
and longing at once, waiting for my cult
leader to carry me away, to contemplate
suffering with one leg pendant and a flirty
smile. With nothing left to confess I started
making up my crimes. I swam in the forbidden
reservoir, stole the afterbirth, drank it up, burned
down the food court, gave away what I had
no claim to. I mean anyone could.

Finally I was part of the miracle
exiting the cellar mid-tornado, unafraid.
Wrapped everything I own in cellophane
and wax until it was a death mask of itself
and my life. Now I can say
I am prepared. All roads
are hard roads unless you
find yourself the treat swallowed
by the more or less patient night sky,
the more or less plaintive phone voice.
When you love someone you're supposed to
love them forever. When you're gone it's soft
anarchy, summer rain, cow heart. A girl
in a T-shirt that says "I'm young every time
I look" is waiting at an airport, but for what.

Winged death, that asshole
with hourglass and attitude.
What dangles from the lion's
mouth? Everything tender
and sighing, all cardinal
signs and burnt clover.
Less and less will I wander
the valley, less and less the
valley gold leaf and cherry.

The Only Good

Palmira Rastelli died on December 28, 1870, which is almost the only thing I know about her. This was soon after Rome had been captured by Italy, completing the long and violent process of Italian unification. Plans for the Brooklyn Bridge had recently been completed, a tunnel was opened up for trains under the River Thames, The Third Republic began in France after Napoleon III was deposed, the Cardiff Giant was revealed to be a hoax inspired by a fight at a Methodist revival meeting, and a British ship called *The City of Boston* disappeared forever with all its passengers and crew, never to be heard from again. Three months after her death, Palmira burned three long and slender fingerprints onto Maria Zaganti's prayer book, as if she had delicately reached across a table to slide the book back to herself.

Purgatory doesn't appear anywhere in the Bible, but it's still an old story, connected to a desire or impulse in the living to care for the dead, perhaps hoping that similar help will be available to them when their ability to care for themselves is more uncertain. One origin story is from the 11th Century. A monk told the Abbot Odilo of Cluny about being shipwrecked on a mysterious island, inhabited only by a strange hermit. The hermit told the monk a story about a chasm from which erupted the screams of tormented souls, and the licking flames of demons, neon orange in the bright sun, a darker umber at night. The hermit explained the demons were frustrated, because souls kept escaping from their torture through the intervention of the living, whose prayers for the unsaved dead and good deeds performed on their behalf freed them from their torment.

Never having much thought about it, I had assumed Purgatory to be a place like Heaven or Hell; its defining feature being permanence beyond what mortals can easily imagine. Against this mistaken understanding, Purgatory is fundamentally temporary, a place souls wait and hope to be redeemed, unbaptised babies and others for whom hell would seem too harsh, but heaven undeserved according to the many rules of heaven. On All Souls Day, prayers of the faithful can intercede on behalf of these trapped souls. I remember a similar practice in the town where I grew up, and the regular controversy where every few years a probably well-intentioned teenager would attempt the posthumous salvation of Anne Frank.

Despite looking it up in advance, when I first tried to visit Piccolo Museo Del Purgatorio in the Chiesa del Sacro Cuore del Suffragio it was closed. It had taken a little while to find the unusually Gothic church just above the Tiber with its many thin spires. I spent the next few hours walking around what was meant to be Hadrian's final resting place, but later became the Pope's house, and then a prison, and now a museum where

I drank a glass of wine and watched seagulls. I'm not sure where Hadrian's remains rest instead. Returning, I was relieved to find the church doors open, and upon entering walked to the back right corner where I knew the museum would be.

Construction on the Chiesa del Sacro Cuore del Suffragio began in 1893 under the direction of the French priest Father Victor Jouet. In 1897 a fire broke out in the chapel. Once contained, the parishioners observed a face burned into the altar, and understood it to be a soul in purgatory reaching out to them. I'm not sure what happened to this altar, or if Father Jouet ever determined the name of the soul and therefore was able to say a Holy Mass for them.

The event did, however, inspire him to begin collecting artifacts of souls in purgatory, which are now displayed on a small corkboard behind glass in the back of the church. The objects are mostly hands and fingers burned onto prayer books and articles of clothing, attempts to communicate with the living, to ask them to pray harder and more. It reminds me, once again, of *Hellbound: Hellraiser II*, when Kirsty finds messages written in blood she understands to be from her deceased father reading, "Help me, I am in Hell," but in fact are a demonic trick that will eventually lead her to a labyrinth in hell. The idea that the ones we love are suffering and that we might be able to help them is a very powerful manipulative tool.

I wonder what the relationship between Palmira and Maria was like. I know that Palmira was the sister of the parish priest of Saint Andrew of Poggio Berni, Don Sante Rastelli. Why wouldn't she reach out to him directly? I read that they were friends, but what kind? Childhood friends, rival friends, secret lovers? Did they often pray together? Did they stay up late, forming a pact that whoever died first would send back a message, and whoever survived would intervene for the other's salvation? Did it work?

Two German tourists observe the objects and photographs with me. Despite my research in advance, looking at pictures on the internet and in guidebooks, I am in no way prepared for how unsettling the experience would be, so much so that I spend the rest of the night slightly disturbed in my thoughts, looking for images in wood grain and puddles. What if you reached out from the grave, asking for help, and no one heard you, or believed what they saw?

I learn that according to Catholic doctrine, you can't go to Hell from Purgatory, only Heaven, so that's good news. An interstitial space, like being at the threshold to where you want most to be for an indefinite but not limitless amount of time, that doesn't sound so bad. It sounds kind of wonderful to me, all promise and

anticipation, like waiting for a kiss you know will come, without the sadness of knowing that once it arrives it will soon enough be over, knowing that while the waiting won't last forever the kissing will, and all you have to do is hang out with demons and burn messages on your friend's bibles until then. Maybe Palmira wasn't even asking for help, maybe she was just flirting, or saying hello.

Receiving a bill for a broken plate, I proceed
to smash each piece methodically. Just part
of that river, Death, Sleep, and Poetry.
Were you addressing (a) the people,
(b) the dead, or (c) The Witch of Atlas?
With your eyes so yellow and your exhales
so long, the effort wasn't the horrible part,
it was not knowing why you did it. Comparing
her to a volcano or lord of demons or the way
a cats eyes widen in response to what for me
is imperceptible. Are you certain of nothing
but the holiness of the heart's affection?
I suppose so, no.

Fruits Of My Labor

I tried to enjoy them
though wicked
and bruised. I
got carried away
on a dream or crest
thinning out with
no guardrail
silvering in the sun.
It was easier than dying
having never seen
Ohio. If you came
home late, if you
brought nothing
back, if I were your
mirror, I mean
if only. I want to
apologize for my
inappropriate behavior
the other night but
I won't because
it's hard enough
to enjoy anything
in this life. "Girls
in love they don't
exist." Goodnight,
New Jersey, locus
of all longing. I did want
to do the right thing but
not that badly. I knew
it was true because
it was in a love song,
or all love songs, or
all songs. You remember
the part in *The Lost Boys*
where the older brother
lets go of the bridge and
falls into the ocean fog?
It was like that but
slowed down and
endless. Only then
did I realize why

regret anything when
you could just not?

Stephanie Drive

It was between the psychic
and the car wash I lost my
favorite scrunchie but told
everyone I gave it away.
And then all the girls go
crazy from both the fire
and the moon's restricted
illumination of the events
that would later transpire
upon this balcony.

It's just this thing
I'm going through.
If I knew it once I've
forgotten it now. No
amount of money or
power could entice
me away, but then
neither has ever
been offered.

Everything she wants
I'll get for her. The fish
will speak and they'll be
so boring. The psychic asks
me if I'm happy but I think
she said hungry and
either way I say no.
I ask her to take me
back to the beginning
but she says that's nowhere
near enough, pushing
strawberries with her
nose across the table.
To end the call I say
I guess I should
let you go.

Bottomless Wings

Do it like you've never been hurt before, they said, opening jam packets with their teeth like everything after Delaware never happened. Do it like your soul was just born from one eternity into the next.

If a hawk could smile it still wouldn't. I mean just because you've never seen it doesn't mean it can't be.

So beset by surprises, it was as if this whole country were under some enchantment. All feelings return to the same place like dimes rolling on an uneven cabin floor. I think it must mean something and so fine be that way then.

They left before dawn but stopped early for breakfast and there she was, the world's last widow, petty, heart-pounding.

When I get back I don't know the difference between faith, grace, and what guides good drivers. I was so alone at the video rental. I touched all the covers, made sacred vows, came back the next day, and the day after that.

I heard her out back shouting, "I'm not a child" to the night like the night won't decide how old you are.

Whether you like it or not I don't want anything else and so it keeps coming, rain in April, blood in eye. In the gift shop at the hospital there was this decorative fountain bucket under a hovering spicket which poured down water from no visible source, endlessly, and I thought there it is, secret of my cul-de-sac, heart of my ancient heart. I begged you to buy it but I don't know if you did.

So I started collecting carved angels, attracted at first by the naturalism of their postures and then by the anonymity of their features, like the name for a regional specialty that means nothing anywhere else.

At the bottom of the ravine at the center of the world we didn't find any of the things we lost. The view from your childhood window on Halloween morning remains unchanged, just the trees get bigger, the trees and you.

Having seen it, clear and soundless, they left the restaurant before they were finished, knowing what was coming and what would not.

I watch them walk to their car through the window, like if it makes you happy then why.

Tonight you're mine is such a sad thing
to say, because each night is so likely
to end, and to leave no trace but
useless feeling, and what was mine
will be no more. Do you remember
the beautiful faux bois of the tables
and chairs at Wendy's, tables and chairs
which were part of one piece, as knees
to thighs, like picnic tables in public parks,
something I always assumed was a part of
a larger strategy for discipline and control.
Or maybe that was somewhere else. Someone
sings with the prettiest voice that it's too late
to cry now, but I can cry whenever, lifted
higher and higher, like the sound of a bell
in a graveyard. I just called to say it's still
my favorite from the basement where I sit
and listen to the synthesizers of the damned.
First there's what you say, and then there's how.

Baby Malum

I called it evil
but what I meant was
what's between bored
and brave or what's
between all us animals
afraid of the gloaming
but not the night
that follows.

And I know you know
I loved it. I stayed late
at parties I wanted to
leave waiting for it,
to carry it's velvet
wallet, to kiss it's
twisted ankle.
Every time I told
the truth I lost
another molar,
dollar, or friend.

In July we learn
anything can be
snow. Careless
love, that little melon,
getting sticky in the sun.

I would prefer to die ahead of you
across from where all music comes.
I said that strikes me as familiar and
she said I am Death's Sister. If you
find winter in it and sure is, if I should
leave here but will not, what does
your breath away but not
kill you, tall purple shadow pins
forgetful bee. Before I go I would
prefer to be seared by clarity's
brushfire half-asleep on a recliner
in the sun. I would prefer in memory
to be called Valentine or Marsh.

There's my animal body, my mineral body,
my oil spill lost wife body, my appearing
aimless in a crowd but never without some
secret purpose body. Like fish in pond scum
my life swirls around me and I wonder what
it's for, all the sin practice and light snacks.
I watch the little barrel roll into the little
house like everything must belong somewhere,
death in LA and diamonds in train station
coin lockers. I am a simple man, crouched
under the table through the whole lunch
mess, with you bright in my heart as
the most immaculate convenience store
in the world. When I followed the law
I did not like it very much. I pushed it
like a plate away from me.

I was there to steal the diamond but in the end
I saved the city. I wore a mask there, crept in
after midnight, my vision obscured and my
breath hot against my own face, like the summer
wind if the summer wind got really nervous. No one
was around, I ascended the ladder soundless,
might as well have been flying, an angel.
That's when I saw her, her eyes like struck
marbles, to this day I never forgot.
I had a plan. It was the absolute end. I
called shotgun, I called flowers, I called
dollars. I called storms, I called hubris,
I called babies. I left town, I called Morgan,
I called cloud like, I left messages from "the road."
I left keys, I'm sorry I left a mess in the kitchen,
I left first thing in the morning. When I met her
sister it all made sense. I learned visions, I held
steady, I knew fear. I heard your violin when I was
walking, you know the feeling. It was all
worth it. I went right back there. The fire was
the last thing we expected.

Save yourself, Elizabeth, or maybe
free yourself, it was hard to translate
she was laughing so much. Do you ever
suddenly recall with dreadful clarity
a minor fear from your childhood like
the shadow cast by a certain banister,
branch, or hall light?

Over the garden wall, sweating, as if so
captivated by a single thought all other
thoughts and feelings lost meaning. Wait,
I'm coming too, I say, though no one
could possibly wait long enough.

I hollowed out the whole world and still
could see you echoed in mountain form,
shimmering below the lake, my evil
queen. Nothing mattered. Regard,
the valley. Every failed attempt
at escape only brought us closer.
I came here to play organ
in your church and clean your
beach house, how was I to know
that you had neither? I think I
just never recovered from
the disappointment that
the searchlights only brought
me to another used car lot.

On the couch with the Living God, for every
Saturday another limousine and you're in
the back with your groceries and a mysterious
ailment that will definitely go away or won't.
The stars when they were young, the woods before
we got there. In the movie he said that as a poet
everything is his problem before he failed to help
his neighbor or her sister. How to consent to be
pleased, how to judge superior the promise
or drop the cake on the way to the party,
painting manners and passions through the careful
placement of bowls. Strange things befell as never
before, the wedding guest rose from the sea
with a message we again failed to translate
before it was too late. Save me from my life,
slow mercy, she walks among us now whose looks
are free. I never knew your hero, just dream girls
back from vacation and all vegetables, flowers, and
fruits. When it was over they said, "That's our show,"
like that wasn't the one thing we'd known all along.
If you give a friend a garden you can watch the roses grow.

Tell It To Your Heart

“When I come back everything will be different,” I said, my hair catching in my lip gloss. We ate popcorn at midnight, drank through paper straws or let the ice hit our teeth like coins in a bone purse. Sometimes the sun came up, sometimes it didn’t. Sometimes the air conditioner left us breathless, shivering, other times it was the mere sight of the snow. Even if I knew it was time to get out of the pool, nothing in the world could make me, not with you there, looking so pretty. I could have said anything was possible, but it was beyond possibility and its more evil, sexy twin. “Where are you going?” “How long will you be?”

For me that was the end of the moon. They had these toys they would shoot up into the sky, you know, like a little electric firework, and the kids would go crazy, begging their parents, absolutely without dignity. But maybe just a different dignity, a dignity of unrestrained desire, a certainty of imminent and eternal satisfaction, removed from any need for justification or proof.

I watched her watch herself in the mirror, putting on her earrings. I wanted to cry. I cried all the time. You didn’t finish your soda before you left, and so I brought the can to my lips to take a little sip, pretending to be you.

I was smoking a cigarette in front of a church like a teenager, in the lightest rain you can imagine, you almost couldn’t feel it so much as vaguely perceive it, looking at this illuminated virgin flanked by decorative ferns, preparing to survive more of my own embarrassing nighttime bullshit.

I found it on the beach and I sold it for a song. It came right back to me. If it makes you feel alive I said, then please don’t stop yourself. If they want what you’ve got make them chase you down for it. I’ll be your clever saboteur, infiltrating the homes of the rich, watching their children sleep, licking the edges of their fine china, stealing their credit cards and renting every party tent in the tri-state area for reasons I refuse to provide.

You know how artificial cherries are more like cherries than cherries themselves? Either the scent or the flavor, so sweet and chemical, it gets you drunker than any wine. I said it was too much but then nothing else is enough.

You wouldn’t think it’d be so romantic, but in *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein writes about how he can’t know if this is his hand in front of him, or if the earth existed for a long time, or if that’s a tree over there, or whether

or not he is in pain, or if he is in pain where the pain is. He can only know where you touched his arm. Where does knowledge come from then? It comes from feeling, I would argue, or that's where it begins, as Audre Lorde explains. It comes from within, but it isn't solipsistic, it is shared. I sit on the fire escape of my sister's apartment and free-bleed through my Levi's, wondering if truth really starts in the chaos of my feelings, and if it does then to where does it guide me, both as headlights and the road and the ditches on either side too. How do you say something true? I say sometimes it's okay to be wrong. Sometimes you can rely on it for now but not forever. Must truth be permanent? Well can anything be?

You can read all about it in my diary.

There in the woods I felt terrified. I tried to call you, but you didn't answer. I could see from every angle, I think I was echo-locating, and my feet lifted off the ground. The static in my hair made me feel like the beautiful star of an 80's movie. I said please don't forget me, but I already knew I would never let you.

Having come all this way, my hair disturbed
by the wind that blows in tenderest warning,
I arrived at your face and didn't know where
to begin. I hope I have proven myself to you,
or to someone, feather twirling in the air
like God's dropped baton, car in the canyon
just tumbling. The songs we sang for the dead
in a Holiday Inn until dawn. We'll come back
to it, the absolute wonder of the skin on your
arm, the living water and the parking lot. As all
joy dooms to eventual misery, a Versaille so
little I took it like a pill, I mean I wore it like
a locket. I could see you in your window
from my place across the street even after
you were gone. Will you still love me
when this is over? Eyes don't get tired
from looking, throats don't get sore from
talking, don't listen to them. I came back
because there was something I forgot
to say but needed to. Everything fits
in the stutter between beats, the silence
when the radiator stops and the afternoon
drops open like a trap door and now you're
standing at the stairs trying to decide what to do.

One talk show bled
into the next, in a woman's laugh
all I could hear were her little teeth. Why not
being a fair enough question if
a question must be asked.

That might have been the night
we swore to protect each other's
souls even if from the grave
or the hostage situation of purgatory.

Disco has always been a dream of mine
but also a good warning for how all liberation
can be transformed into a vehicle for
making money on pain. In disco the stakes feel
very high, to stay alive in the inferno, but then
all the songs are so long, like there's all the time
in the world for pleasure because the night will never
end, anything could be anything, one bass line
indistinguishable from the next, the inferno
neverending.

Our mothers were friends too, we all
took care of each other, and the light
would shake and thunder sound every time
we laughed. We made circles around the
amphitheater, whooping and stomping
like animals.

If I bruised the fruit I do
apologize. Hands to the air
waiting for you to finish
your conversation so we can leave.

When you wield your softness
like a weapon it makes me
weak and no one even notices.
That's how well it works.

At first I rang the outer bell
but it wasn't clear enough.
I rearranged your lipgloss
from cherry to wine, I even

disrupted the lawn furniture
in my growing despair.

I mean Purgatory is okay
I guess but even in the dark
it's hard to sleep, so I just
chew on my lips and watch
the flames.

I'll put my fingers to it and burn
your prayer book, Maria, so that
you will remember me.

Dirgey and sullen, the intermittent
chanting can get redundant, but I
join in as I please. Maria

at her mirror, annoyed by her brother
thinks up lies for later and other ghost stories.
How casual the victorious, how unnerving
the children. I was so afraid you wouldn't
come back I left, but not for long.
Until I call you back from the side like
so much perfume or night swimming.
I burnt for you this message, I awaited
your reply.

From here it's all yesterday's
parties and finger food, the golden
age of amateurs returned. The only
thing I will agree is classic is someone
else's cherry chapstick. Did you spend
the night in the castle? Are you saving
it for later? Please see that my grave
has my name on it in bubble letters.
You are the mountain on which I take
the train with a little present in my
lap for everyone I know. Strange
the allure of the green water's
gesture when you know it would
just swallow you up, promise honey
you can have it, take a sip from the
algae chalice. At the bottom I explain
I came here to be part of the panorama
and because I thought there would be
free drinks. Any side is the other side
of something, breath hot on the mirror,
and cold in the tunnel, the deluge of
tomorrow's mellow chamber pop
already humming at the dam.