

Litany in Which Certain Things Are Crossed Out By Richard Siken

Every morning the maple leaves.

Every morning another chapter where the hero shifts
from one foot to the other. Every morning the same big
and little words all spelling out desire, all spelling out
You will be alone always and then you will die.

So maybe I wanted to give you something more than a catalog
of non-definitive acts,
something other than the desperation.

Dear So-and-So, I'm sorry I couldn't come to your party.

Dear So-and-So, I'm sorry I came to your party
and seduced you

and left you bruised and ruined, you poor sad thing.

You want a better story. Who wouldn't?

A forest, then. Beautiful trees. And a lady singing.

Love on the water, love underwater, love, love and so on.

What a sweet lady. Sing lady, sing! Of course, she wakes the dragon.

Love always wakes the dragon and suddenly
flames everywhere.

I can tell already you think I'm the dragon,
that would be so like me, but I'm not. I'm not the dragon.

I'm not the princess either.

Who am I? I'm just a writer. I write things down.

I walk through your dreams and invent the future. Sure,
I sink the boat of love, but that comes later. And yes, I swallow
glass, but that comes later.

And the part where I push you

flush against the wall and every part of your body rubs against the

bricks,
shut up
I'm getting to it.
For a while I thought I was the dragon.
I guess I can tell you that now. And, for a while, I thought I was
the princess,
cotton candy pink, sitting there in my room, in the tower of the
castle,
young and beautiful and in love and waiting for you with
confidence
but the princess looks into her mirror and only sees the princess,
while I'm out here, slogging through the mud, breathing fire,
and getting stabbed to death.
Okay, so I'm the dragon. Big deal.
You still get to be the hero.
You get magic gloves! A fish that talks! You get eyes like flashlights!
What more do you want?
I make you pancakes, I take you hunting, I talk to you as if you're
really there.
Are you there, sweetheart? Do you know me? Is this microphone
live?
Let me do it right for once,
for the record, let me make a thing of cream and stars that
becomes,
you know the story, simply heaven.
Inside your head you hear a phone ringing
and when you open your eyes
only a clearing with deer in it. Hello deer.
Inside your head the sound of glass,
a car crash sound as the trucks roll over and explode in slow motion

motion.

Hello darling, sorry about that.

Sorry about the bony elbows, sorry we

lived here, sorry about the scene at the bottom of the stairwell
and how I ruined everything by saying it out loud.

Especially that, but I should have known.

You see, I take the parts that I remember and stitch them back
together

to make a creature that will do what I say
or love me back.

I'm not really sure why I do it, but in this version you are not
feeding yourself to a bad man

against a black sky prickled with small lights.

I take it back.

The wooden halls like caskets. These terms from the lower depths.

I take them back.

Here is the repeated image of the lover destroyed.

Crossed out.

Clumsy hands in a dark room. Crossed out. There is something
underneath the floorboards.

Crossed out. And here is the tabernacle
reconstructed.

Here is the part where everyone was happy all the time and we
were all

forgiven,

even though we didn't deserve it.

Inside your head you hear

a phone ringing, and when you open your eyes you're washing up
in a stranger's bathroom,

standing by the window in a yellow towel, only twenty minutes away
from the dirtiest thing you know.

All the rooms of the castle except this one, says someone, and
suddenly

darkness,
suddenly only darkness.
In the living room, in the broken yard,
in the back of the car as the lights go by. In the airport
bathroom's gurgle and flush, bathed in a pharmacy of
unnatural light,
my hands looking weird, my face weird, my feet too far away.
And then the airplane, the window seat over the wing with a view
of the wing and a little foil bag of peanuts.
I arrived in the city and you met me at the station,
smiling in a way
that made me frightened. Down the alley, around the arcade,
up the stairs of the building
to the little room with the broken faucets, your drawings, all your
things,
I looked out the window and said
This doesn't look that much different from home,
because it didn't,
but then I noticed the black sky and all those lights.
We walked through the house to the elevated train.
All these buildings, all that glass and the shiny beautiful
mechanical wind.
We were inside the train car when I started to cry. You were crying
too,
smiling and crying in a way that made me
even more hysterical. You said I could have anything I wanted, but I
just couldn't say it out loud.
Actually, you said Love, for you,
is larger than the usual romantic love. It's like a religion. It's
terrifying. No one
will ever want to sleep with you.
Okay, if you're so great, you do it—
here's the pencil, make it work . . .

If the window is on your right, you are in your own bed. If the window is over your heart, and it is painted shut, then we are breathing river water.

Build me a city and call it Jerusalem. Build me another and call it Jerusalem.

We have come back from Jerusalem where we found not what we sought, so do it over, give me another version, a different room, another hallway, the kitchen painted over and over, another bowl of soup.

The entire history of human desire takes about seventy minutes to tell.

Unfortunately, we don't have that kind of time.

Forget the dragon,

leave the gun on the table, this has nothing to do with happiness.

Let's jump ahead to the moment of epiphany,

in gold light, as the camera pans to where

the action is,

lakeside and backlit, and it all falls into frame, close enough to see the blue rings of my eyes as I say

something ugly.

I never liked that ending either. More love streaming out the wrong way,

and I don't want to be the kind that says the wrong way.

But it doesn't work, these erasures, this constant refolding of the pleats.

There were some nice parts, sure,

all lemondrop and mellonball, laughing in silk pajamas

and the grains of sugar

on the toast, love love or whatever, take a number. I'm sorry it's such a lousy story.

Dear Forgiveness, you know that recently

we have had our difficulties and there are many things

I want to ask you.

tried that one time, high school, second lunch, and then again, years later, in the chlorinated pool.

I am still talking to you about help. I still do not have these luxuries.

I have told you where I'm coming from, so put it together.

We clutch our bellies and roll on the floor . . .

When I say this, it should mean laughter, not poison.

I want more applesauce. I want more seats reserved for heroes.

Dear Forgiveness, I saved a plate for you.

Quit milling around the yard and come inside.