The Passion

Jeanette Winterson

ALSO BY JEANETTE WINTERSON
Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit

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hours to watch us put out to sea. He wants to launch 25,000 men in fifteen minutes.
He will.

This sudden weather is unexpected. If it worsens it will be impossible to risk the Channel.

Patrick says the Channel is full of mermaids. He says it's the mermaids lonely for a man that pull so many of us down.

Watching the white crests slapping against the sides of the ships, I wonder if this mischief storm is their doing?

Optimistically, it may pass.

Noon. The rain is running off our noses down our jackets into our boots. To talk to the next man I have to cup my hands around my mouth. The wind has already loosened scores of barges, forcing men out chest deep into the impossible waters, making a nonsense of our best knots. The officers say we can't risk a practice today. Bonaparte, with his coat pulled round his head, says we can. We will.

July 20th, 1804. Two thousand men were drowned today.

In gales so strong that Patrick as look-out had to be tied to barrels of apples, we discovered that our barges are children's toys after all. Bonaparte stood on the dockside and told his officers that no storm could defeat us.

'Why, if the heavens fell down we would hold them up on the points of our lances.'

Perhaps. But there's no will and no weapon that can hold back the sea.

I lay next to Patrick, flat and strapped, hardly seeing at all for the spray, but every gap the wind left showed me another gap where a boat had been.

The mermaids won't be lonely any more.

We should have turned on him, should have laughed in his face, should have shook the dead-men-seaweed-hair in his face.

But his face is always pleading with us to prove him right.

At night when the storm had dropped and we were left in sudden tents with steaming bowls of coffee, none of us spoke out.

No one said, Let's leave him, let's hate him. We held our bowls in both hands and drank our coffee with the brandy ration he'd sent specially to every man.

I had to serve him that night and his smile pushed away the madness of arms and legs that pushed in at my ears and mouth.

I was covered in dead men.

In the morning, 2,000 new recruits marched into Boulogne.

Do you ever think of your childhood?

I think of it when I smell porridge. Sometimes after I've been by the docks I walk into town and use my nose tracking fresh bread and bacon. Always, passing a particular house, that sits like the others in a sort of row, and is the same as them, I smell the slow smell of oats. Sweet but with an edge of salt. Thick like a blanket. I don't know who lives in the house, who is responsible, but I imagine the yellow fire and the black pot. At home we used a copper pot that I polished, loving to polish anything that would keep a shine. My mother made porridge, leaving the oats overnight by the old fire. Then in the morning when her bellows work had sent the sparks shooting up the chimney, she burned the oats brown at the sides, so that the sides were like brown paper lining the pot and the inside slopped white over the edge.

We trod on a flag floor but in the winter she put down hay and the hay and the oats made us smell like a manger.

Most of my friends ate hot bread in the mornings.

I was happy but happy is an adult word. You don't have to ask a child about happy, you see it. They are or they are not. Adults talk about being happy because largely they are not. Talking about it is the same as trying to catch the wind. Much
THE PASSION

easier to let it blow all over you. This is where I disagree with
the philosophers. They talk about passionate things but there is
no passion in them. Never talk happiness with a philosopher.

But I’m not a child any more and often the Kingdom of
Heaven eludes me too. Now, words and ideas will always slip
themselves in between me and the feeling. Even our birthright
feeling, which is to be happy.

This morning I smell the oats and I see a little boy watching
his reflection in a copper pot he’s polished. His father comes in
and laughs and offers him his shaving mirror instead. But in the
shaving mirror the boy can only see one face. In the pot he can
see all the distortions of his face. He sees many possible faces
and so he sees what he might become.

The recruits have arrived, most without moustaches, all with
apples in their cheeks. Fresh country produce like me. Their
faces are open and eager. They’re being fusses over, given
uniforms and duties to replace the yell for the milk pail and the
insistent pigs. The officers shake hands with them; a grown-up
thing to do.

No one mentions yesterday’s parade. We’re dry, the tents are
drying, the soaked barges are upturned in the dock. The sea is
innocent and Patrick on his pillar is shaving quietly. The recruits
are being divided into regiments; friends are separated on prin-
ciple. This is a new start. These boys are men.

What souvenirs they have brought from home will soon be
lost or eaten.

Odd, the difference that a few months makes. When I came
here I was just like them, still am in many ways, but my
companions are no longer the shy boys with cannon-fire in their
eyes. They are rougher, tougher. Naturally you say, that’s what
army life is about.

It’s about something else too, something hard to talk about.

When we came here, we came from our mothers and our

sweethearts. We were still used to our mothers with their work-
yard arms that could clout the strongest of us and leave our ears
swollen. And we courted our sweethearts in the country way.
slow, with the fields that ripen at harvest. Fierce, with the
scows that rut the earth. Here, without women, with only our
imagination and a handful of whores, we can’t remember what
it is about women that can turn a man through passion into
something holy. Bible words again, but I am thinking of my
father who shaded his eyes on those sunburnt evenings and
learned to take his time with my mother. I am thinking of my
mother with her noisy heart and of all the women waiting in the
fields for the men who drowned yesterday and all the mothers’
sons who have taken their place.

We never think of them here. We think of their bodies and
now and then we talk about home but we don’t think of them
as they are; the most solid, the best loved, the well known.

They go on. Whatever we do or undo, they go on.

There was a man in our village who liked to think of himself as
an inventor. He spent a lot of time with pulleys and bits of rope
and offcuts of wood making devices that could raise a cow or
laying pipes to bring the river water right into the house. He
was a man with light in his voice and an easy way with his
neighbours. Used to disappointment, he could always assuage
the disappointment in others. And in a village subject to the rain
and sun there are many disappointments.

All the while that he invented and re-invented and cheered
us up, his wife, who never spoke except to say, ‘Dinner’s ready’,
worked in the fields and kept house and, because the man liked
his bed, she was soon bringing up six children too.

Once, he went to town for a few months to try and make his
fortune and when he came back with no fortune and without
their savings, she was sitting quietly in a clean house mending
clean clothes and the fields were planted for another year.
models of the universe

edited by Stuart Friebert and David Young

AN ANTHOLOGY OF THE PROSE POEM

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PRETTY

It was my birthday. I was half child, sensing by their feel which scenes I would remember. My mother tore wet lettuce with her brown hands. My brothers, hurrying to wash up, ran through the kitchen smelling of sweat and crushed grass. Outside my father stood over the grill, weight on one foot, hand on hip holding a hotpad I'd made at six. Chicken, basted red, crackled and smoked.

How old are you this birthday Miss? Thirteen? my father asked. I nodded. Thirteen, he repeated. Pretty soon you'll be fifty-three and won't know where the time went.

His heavy face, behind the curtain of wavering heat, was framed in an old green fishing hat. On its bill a pink striped trout jumped gracefully from the water, hooked — tense body a glistening, deathless curve.
Hand to Hand

We sit in a circle around First Sergeant. Who wants to try me he says and my hand goes up and before I know what I'm doing I'm doing it. He slams me into the ground like someone made of water — my back, my lungs, some clouds. I take his hand and he spins me and I'm down again. I can feel the day lost, the night I'm in my rack, hurt, unable to sleep, he comes like so much man, leads me past the fireguard, past fifty sleeping soldiers, pushes his bunk aside, pulls me and we dance and I learn hand to hand brothers, learn the places on the body that betray. . . . Close my eyes. Open them. Fall violently upward.

Convoy

On a convoy from Bong Son to Hue we stop at a Vietnamese graveyard. People set up shelter halves right over the top of gravestones: one rock wall just in case. It's raining, I smell people.

Two in the morning someone wakes me for guard. I'm out of bed, standing in the cold. The man next to me walks over to talk. A helicopter is parked thirty yards in front of us and in the moon it begins to move. My friend becomes leader, he wants to fire, I'm afraid of an explosion. He tells me to circle the ship while he covers.

At the window it's dark, no moon. Inside the pilot, restless turning in his sleep, rocking his ship.

Sailing to Bien Hoa

In my dream of the hydro-plane I'm sailing to Bien Hoa. The shrapnel in my thighs like tiny glaciers. I remember a flower, a kite, a mankin playing the guitar, a yellow fish eating a bird, a truck floating in urine, a rat carrying a banjo, a fool counting the cards, a monkey praying, a procession of whales and far off, two children eating rice, speaking French. I'm sure of the children, the damp flute, the long line of vowels.
The Buddha in the Attic

Julie Otsuka

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night on his way to the fuji. And even though we knew our parents would care for her well—if you stay here in the village, they had warned us, you will never marry at all—we still felt guilty for having chosen our own life over hers, and on the boat we wept for her every night for many nights in a row and then one morning we woke up and dried our eyes and said, "That's enough," and began to think of other things. Which kimono to wear when we landed. How to fix our hair. What to say when we first saw him. Because we were on the boat now, the past was behind us, and there was no going back.

ON THE BOAT we had no idea we would dream of our daughter every night until the day that we died, and that in our dreams she would always be three and as she was when we last saw her: a tiny figure in a dark red kimono squatting at the edge of a puddle, utterly entranced by the sight of a dead floating bee.

ON THE BOAT we ate the same food every day and every day we breathed the same stale air. We sang the same songs and laughed at the same jokes and in the morning, when the weather was mild, we climbed up out of the cramped quarters of the hold and strolled the deck in our wooden sandals and light summer kimonos, stopping, every now and then, to gaze out at the same endless blue sea. Sometimes a flying fish would land at our feet, flopping and out of breath, and one of us—usually it was one of the fishermen’s daughters—would pick it up and toss it back into the water. Or a school of dolphins would appear.

out of nowhere and leap alongside the boat for hours. One calm, windless morning when the sea was flat as glass and the sky a brilliant shade of blue, the smooth black flank of a whale suddenly rose up out of the water and then disappeared and for a moment we forgot to breathe. It was like looking into the eye of the Buddha.

ON THE BOAT we often stood on the deck for hours with the wind in our hair, watching the other passengers go by. We saw turbaned Sikhs from the Punjab who were fleeing to Panama from their native land. We saw wealthy White Russians who were fleeing the revolution. We saw Chinese laborers from Hong Kong who were going to work in the cotton fields of Peru. We saw King Lee Uwanowich and his famous band of gypsies, who owned a large cattle ranch in Mexico and were rumored to be the richest band of gypsies in the world. We saw a trio of sunburned German tourists and a handsome Spanish priest and a tall, ruddy Englishman named Charles, who appeared at the railing every afternoon at quarter past three and walked several brisk lengths of the deck. Charles was traveling in first class, and had dark green eyes and a sharp, pointy nose, and spoke perfect Japanese, and was the first white person many of us had ever seen. He was a professor of foreign languages at the university in Osaka, and had a Japanese wife, and a child, and had been to America many times, and was endlessly patient with our questions. Was it true that Americans had a strong animal odor? (Charles laughed and said, “Well, do I?” and let us lean in close for a sniff.) And just how hairy were they? (“About as hairy as
Waiting in the street—like always—for Dad, he's left me watching the other kids. They have pistachio ice cream dripping a cheap green down their little fists and onto their t-shirts. We're all sitting in the gutter, in the dirt, licking our ice cream cones. We like his Sunday visits because we get to eat junk food all day. He buys us anything. Except sometimes he disappears like this at Lincoln Park. Leaves me to watch the kids, watch the little ones so they don't run into the street, watch my sisters so none of the people passing by messes with them. We watch a big dog like a great dane run out into the street. The traffic screeches to a halt, except one car doesn't see the dog coming around another vehicle and hits it with a loud slam. The dog is too heavy to fall; instead, it spins all the way around like a top, crumpled and shocked into running off crookedly into the park. The traffic pauses and resumes. I tell my whining sisters, "Shut up, see what happens?" My dad comes back finally, a twelve-pack in a paper sack under his arm, leading us into the park where he can drink under the trees, where the Catholic kids shriek and shout from the sand by the swings and slides, dressed in their Sunday clothes.
I was the lion or you were the lion. Your hand bled and mine held the blade or mine dripped, I stamped and cursed, and you laughed. We stood on the grass after all or we stood in the shade while our children played. And our shadows either lengthened across the green or faded from it, shadows covering us over. I knew or I did not know that one of us was gonna make it. One of us, and we held beer cans in our hands and watched the kids play and talked about what it took to get this far, and either we said enough or we did not say enough. Now either the kids play up and down the street and across the lawns or the lawns are empty of them, and that tree, the one in front of your old house, it’s full of lemons.
Also by Kathryn Davis

The Girl Who Trod on a Loaf
Hell
The Walking Tour

Labrador

Kathryn Davis

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Into my eye, Willie. A fleck of you flew in there, making a tear well up—that little shining star you saw and swept onto the tip of your finger to suck. It fell and fell down the dark shaft of your throat, trickling into your heart, where it glowed. The room filled in with light. I must have been about two years old and you—you were six, all dressed up in a red-and-green plaid dress, the bodice smocked with X's and O's of white thread, the sleeves puffed. You leaned over the edge of my crib and brought your face down, closer and closer, so that it was enormous, like the moon when it rolls across the horizon, when it has stopped being the moon and is imperious, rolling up and unrolling whole oceans. The black centers of your eyes got bigger, your nostrils got bigger, too, and then your mouth opened. "Kitty," it said.

What did you want? You were just a six-year-old girl on her way to school. You were just a six-year-old girl whose red plastic purse dangled from a gold chain worn across the wrist. Maybe you were finally going to give me one of the religious pictures that you accepted from the boy whose mat was adjacent to yours at nap time—shiny pictures of the Lamb of God that, ordinarily, you would never let me
touch but would show to me mysteriously behind Mama's and Daddy's backs, as if we were doing something wrong.

"Kitty," you said to me, and the black oval of your mouth was so close to my face that I thought my name gave off a smell like milk. "Say, Goodbye. Say, Goodbye, Willie."

But my love for you tied my tongue, and then you whirled around and all I could see was the sparkling absence of you, which turned, little by little, into rosebuds: the flat, high walls on every side of me where scolding, bunched-up cat faces peeked out of the petals. Shadows of birds flew there, Willie, and I began to cry. "Hush," said Mama, "hush." Her hands were firm and wet and the shadows of birds flew across her face—so many faces, Willie!—and the flying had to it a whiff of flowers. She lifted me up. There was an egg to eat far away. Snip snip the top lifted off and out came the steam. This was in the kitchen.

For a long time this was the only day there was. There was the quiet morning out of which so many things flew—the dark fleck and the star and Mama's wet hands; the birds and the yolk of the egg—before afternoon came and you took me with you to the lake. On the dirt road I looked down and saw your long thin feet in ballet slippers the same whitish pink as your skin—in fifth position, you told me, the most difficult position of all—the T of your feet marking that exact place on the dirt road forever. You pointed to the west, where the mountains of the Presidential Range stuck up, still covered with snow on their peaks, and you told me that if we were standing there we could see all the way to the seashore where, long ago, our mama and daddy had participated in an event called a honeymoon. There the world fell apart into black rocks, against which the sea crashed over and over, like the boy in the story who hit himself on the head with the hammer. "Kiss me, my darling," our daddy whispered. You described it all to me: the bright red lips of our mama puckering up.

the way her eyelids fluttered and then flapped closed. "You're not supposed to look," you told me. "That's how you fall in love."

It was early in the spring and under our feet the road was dry, but the ditches were filled with mud and running water; off in the woods we could see humps of snow, those sleeping beasts whose only desire it was to cart us off on their backs to the blue-black countries marked by the stars. "They're sleeping now," you said. "We've got to be very quiet."

Mountains stood all around us but the road was flat, cutting through the places scooped away by the glacier. White pines and red pines grew on either side of the road, and the only way a person could tell the difference between the two was to pick one of the little bundles of needles. If it was a white pine the needles were five to a bundle and you could bend them without breaking them; the red pine needles were two to a bundle and brittle. "Pick a tree," you said, "and if you can guess what it is before you pick the needles then you'll get your wish."

But all I could see was two green waves, chinked and ripped with sunlight. My eyesight was terrible, although we didn't know that yet. "Green," I said, pointing. "Green, green, green, green."

"Oh, Kitty," you said, and you were laughing. "Well, okay, make a wish anyway. Go ahead."

I screwed my eyes shut as I'd seen you do over your birthday cake, and there we were, the two of us, standing together on the dirt road, with the lake winking through the trees in the distance. Then I felt your arm brush against mine so that, just for a second, the little hairs caught onto each other. "I can't," I said.

Of course I could, now. And I wonder, would it have made a difference if I'd been able to tell you what I saw? Because, instead, you made a wish for both of us, and I don't think it's any secret that it was your wish that floated