

Excerpt from *Slug Mojo Poetry*, a chapbook by Ami Mattison

Slug

I.

That summer, as we sat on the brick steps in front of my house and watched slugs mate, I was in love with you.

The slugs were all sex and slime. Their brown-grey, hermaphroditic bodies shifted and reshaped; one became a horn and the other a flower. They slithered, embraced, and merged—an indistinct mass, a single, pulsing organ—spiraling and suspended from a thin thread of slime.

I wanted you then, not because the slugs were fucking, but because you were enthralled by it. Flashlight in hand, you squatted and illuminated the scene.

"Who knew?" You were laughing. You shook your head, looked at me and then back at the slugs.

I was disbelieving as well. The spectacle and transformation—really, slug sex defied our puny imaginations. We were shocked by nature's perversity, by the unpredictable and seemingly unnatural nature of nature, and we believed ourselves suddenly wiser from the experience.

"This isn't a story," she tells me. She's a poet, and she only writes stories that aren't stories. I call them "anti-narrative narratives."

Her stories are like glimpses of stories, like opening a novel and finding a description and opening another novel and finding another description and then putting those descriptions together as if they bear some relationship with one another, as if they are telling the same story.

Before we saw slugs fucking, we killed them. Enemies to the vegetables planted on the side of the house, they were ravenous, ruthless, and efficient destroyers. We filled plastic bowls with cheap beer, tempted them with alcoholic suicide. Nightly, we monitored the bowls. We were scientists, curious for knowledge of slug death. With twigs, we shoved them into the beer pools, held them down, as they writhed and struggled, and we watched as each slug finally stopped twitching and dissolved to a dark watery mess.

I was horrified by the length of their struggle, the slow-paced agony of their dying. Still, I was ruthless against their will to survive. I pushed one after another into the beer.

"Don't," you said. "It's too awful."

When I found her, she was a tragic ending. She lay in an alley, her body half-propped against the brick wall. She was broken and bleeding. "Those shits snuck up behind me. I was outnumbered. Everyone watched and then walked away."

For months thereafter, she carried her ruin everywhere with her, wore it like faded jeans—clean, but tattered and fraying. I was the only one she trusted with her defeat. I licked her wounds, was careful to avoid tender places.

It was easy to fall in love with her.

One night, we observed a single slug who clung placidly to the side of a bowl as it took in a good, long swig of beer. It rested there for awhile and then inched away, seemingly unharmed.

"Oh no. We're only killing the stupid ones."

"Yeah," you laughed. "We're breeding a master race of slugs."

We changed our plan of attack to midnight raids. Armed with rubber gloves and flashlights, we stormed the garden. We picked off slugs, one by one, pulled them from tender leaves and stems, tossed them over the fence into the neighbor's yard.

"Do you think they ever withstand the impact?"

I tossed a slug across the garden, stepped close, and peered at its slimy death.

"Nope."

The first time she smiled at me I came undone. Her eyes were upward curves, small mirrors of her smile, and though I wasn't close enough to hear her quiet laughter, emitting from her lips, I could see her head tilted back ever so slightly in recognition.

When she smiled, she became skilled fingers, unraveling the poorly sewn stitch of me, coming apart at the seams, until I was a fine, thin thread, the shortest distance to her.

(Excerpt from *The Encyclopedia of Slugs*, Sixth Edition, vol. 15, p.678)

Introduced from Europe during the 1800s, the Great Grey Garden Slug *Limax Maximus* (literal translation="great slug") is a common pest to vegetables, field crops, and ornamentals throughout the United States and Canada. Its morphology includes two sets of tentacles, a mouth, a respiratory pore, a mantle, and a keel, located at its tail. When disturbed, the Great Grey Slug secretes a milky slime, distinguishing it from other species. It is attracted to damp or humid environments, spending sunny days beneath logs, stones, or crop debris and appearing to feed at night or when it rains.

The Great Grey Slug mates during the warm months and is hermaphroditic. While it can self-fertilize, or reproduce without mating, it tends to do so, only when alone, preferring instead to trade genetic material with a mate.

Known for their unusual mating habits, Great Grey Slugs tend to circle one another, usually for hours, lunging, sideswiping, licking, and nipping at one another's tails. After this ritual, they seek out a high place from which to suspend from a thick string of mucus and copulate.

II.

The killing was regrettable and ugly. That it was also necessary made us know, finally, who we were. We didn't blink when we stared at one another, but if we had, we would have opened our eyes to the same knowledge of ourselves and each other. We were killers, each of us, though in different ways.

Often, you didn't have the stomach for killing, and sometimes you were just lazy. In these times, I killed for you, and I didn't mind the extra chore because I was driven with responsibility. Things needed killing. So I killed--efficiently, swiftly, and consistently. I was disciplined killing. She killed according to mood and whim.

Still, we knew who we were. When I looked at you, I saw what could have been my own face—an obscene smile, murderous eyes, lips to die for—reflected back at me. I didn't need a mirror. I knew what a killer looked like.

Individual slugs were easy to kill—to slam against concrete, to stomp with a boot, to dissolve with salt. Still, we were outnumbered. The slugs fucked shamelessly; they bred indiscreet and indiscriminate of sex.

We shrugged our shoulders, abandoned the garden.

My chest contracted, breathless, as I hovered there, above her naked flesh, her breasts rising to press against my own. She was beautiful and overwhelming. She was an open space, and I hurtled towards her. My dark, wet fingers, blind and searching, inched forward. Already, my half-dead heart was breaking.

III.

It happened on a summer night, a random passing. Alone and separate, we slow-inched roundabout paths towards one another. Then, finally, we merged. Driven partly by instinct and partly by chance, we shifted and reshaped, fitting our bodies one into the other. We were hermaphroditic and perverse. We embraced and spun and tumbled over the edge into darkness. Spiraling towards our endings, we were spared only by the fine, thin thread between us. Suspended and held fast, we were barely breathing.

That was us, on the brick steps in front of the house. That was us, flaunting love.