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The Demon Lover

Kelly Searsmith

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Mythcon 51: The Mythic, the Fantastic, and the Alien

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The Demon Lover

by Kelly Searsmith

the princess in her garden

She slides on calluses,
thick as slippers, among
the windjilted tulips.

A black cat, thinking bees
between orange eyes, sprawls,
The stone bench having cooled.

The moon is a pale quest
ion marking the end
of a noon's June sentence.

On its hook she might hang
a slip or her white neck,
if it weren't fishing.

Dreamy, she stops rocks gawks
at the old man leaning
to snare true lovers' hearts.

He has heard they make fine
eating, if one might trap
them young, wild, and beating.

Hers, safe as bumbles from
Mirabelle, opens, shuts
as if trying to catch

red rain which tips two lips.
Dreams, though fairy-whispers
spoiled her crib sleep, saying

the day first kissed, she'll
not outlive; warded fast
in father's virgin yard.

ii the farm boy at his plow

All the day, all the day
he worked his way homeward
one row astray, one back.

Each step, sore bones scraped raw
the soft, peeling belly
of his slow, sunburnt mind.

Man's a mulé, I'm a fool:
so went the song that drove
the plow he hard pressed on.

Relentless the sun seared
earth and youth, both ripened
for the seedtime, though dry.

Mouse and worm, dirt and dream
the blade cut sure, the blade
cut clean; dull steps followed.

A nose full of planting
smelt the same as dying
along the dark lane home.

All the while, a lonesome,
sweat-watered seed shifts, heart
to hand to heart, dormant

until moonlight blooms.

iii theirs was a midnight meeting

Never has he seen so
much light gathered, careless,
it runs thick down the folds

of her dress, pouring o
ver field and lane and lungs,
there, then, he wakes into

intention, parts the hedge,
strides the lawn, breaks quiet
with ardent steps, until

his voice slips warm greeting
in her mind's shell, chilled by
late sleep, early dreaming.

She sees Gardener's servant,
clod-stuck with sweat, until
that voice echoes ocean,

transforms implement to
man – He has asked her name,
gazed with glittering eyes

more starved than a beggar's,
she feels a tidal pull
moonlight magnetizing

blood; closes long, gray eyes,
opens mouth to better
drink in death by drowning.

iv and the boy became a poet

One kiss he took from her
melting face, all the warmth
was in her lips, whiskey

never gave such heat as
he drank in, blazes so
night turns day, flesh to fire,

the moon falls from the sky,
dissolves into mist ere
earth, scatters stars like snow,

the old man lays pierced on
his own hook between them,
they two like statues stand,

he the sun, she shadow
ten years times ten snow and
summer spring and leaf left

them there, an annual ball
to mark the morning they
were discovered dreaming

of eternity, found
in one thoughtless kiss,
until he tired at last,

blinked, broke, woke, found her cold,
parted suddenly, dimmed
shivered, shook, and called her

a lamia who took
the sweetness from his youth;
the youth from his body.

But long ago she'd turned
to stone, and for years he
had kissed himself alone.

Kelly Searsmith on the poem: "*The Demon Lover*," a male Cinderella story in verse (this catalogued tale type usually tells of a poor male lover who seduces / wins a princess; in a version by Laurence Housman, the princess leaves her castle to live in squalor -- mine has a more Tennysonian twist as the lover's chilled romance becomes his misogynous raison d'être for becoming a poet).