

Abstract

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The poems in this collection explore certain sacred and self-destructive threads in the twenty-first century experience of dailiness. Written in free verse, the poems shift between voices, characters, and registers, seeking unsettled and unsettling corners in ideas and experiences of profession, companionship, and kinship. Many of the poems are driven by exits and retreats, using the dramatic moment of departure to explore ambivalence and desire in the present and lost moment.

LIPS CLOSED FOR THE WAVE

by

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DEDICATION

To my grandmother, Phyllis Smart Young, who knew and wrote and loved the poetry of the woods, of Maine, of the North, of all these, of more.

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A Prayer Against Useless

Sometimes it is just the table
and the morning
and all dread coming
like a lost cause.
We sit down slowly
to our next accumulation
of counterbalance,
lost emails, twists of numbness,
faint skitterings in the jaw,
broken condoms, chittering
in the kitchen walls,
counterbalance,
like fat lodged in the gut,
that will not out,
so dreading it seems to be
a useless emotion towards
all the attendant falling.
Be like the soft red flower
in the plant-box barricade
between my table
and the Navy memorial.
I do not think –
I do not think it is worried
by its slight edging curl,
which would not change
the next day's stealing over
red furred sex song, come
and get me coppers song, life
singing into cold like a map
of stars, haloed in distance.
I will not dread it anymore
because it's just the turn
of things that come to us.
I will not dread it.
I will finish my coffee
and begin.

Impossible Men

Hamlet never got a break –
even when he set sail from
his troubles (some of his troubles).
How far could he have gotten
if he forswore himself to ghosts,
or got himself a better therapist,
or moved to the Maine woods;
could he have stopped listening
to the dead? The birch and hemlock
there grow on the backs of their
soft-spiked fathers, and the white oak
shifts slowly in the light of August
rain. Perhaps more feasible –
a Wallander-esque Swedish haunt,
forests more ancient than torques
and songs of the ships made
from dark, sleek wood.
Perhaps more likely –
walking the streets of Paris,
the whore houses and ale houses
of Paris, a prince like Hal ready
to fall again. Could he have walked
into the night and never sought
the bright hands of the knife
that he did or did not hold?
I imagine white linen.
I imagine leather sleeves,
wine and flesh staining
a tongue that would lament
no more. And my small troubles –
no unclean beds, no beloveds
gathering lupine and myrtle
and threading them through
auburn hair – dark lady – no –
still stalking like second players
creeping a dread line onto every
damn ship. Easier outs than death,
but death the answer rising
like smoke on the wood porch
above the winter bank –
the stopping of all madness
and difficult men asking
impossible questions.

Caught The Light

This has been a terrible time,
and there will be worse,
but this winter, I finally saw
how the low sparrows
catch sunset under them.
At first, I thought
it was the halo of flawed
specks that sometimes float
into my vision that I pretend
each time to be a one-time
visitation, but I saw it again
and again, as the sparrows swung
in laps around the court yard,
always at the height of the sixth
floor, so that they almost
broke into untouched sky.
It's not a metaphor, just
the orange and the rose
on their vulnerable fletched bows
of brown and their thin daubs
of trunks. They moved like sprinters
at the end of practice.
They moved like we may have,
hitting the curve of the 400 meter
and not slowing down,
and Coach White, sweet,
soft spoken, dead now,
hoarsely cheering,
orange flecks on bleached
t-shirts and iridescent
skin of every shade.
We might have touched
the light this way, hurtling
in a beat of limbs like a courtyard
full of sparrows turning past
my window as one, as one,
and never known.

Reasons To Persevere

I don't know what the end of March will bring,
or even if the next month will be better.
Last time we Skyped with K, she ended
on the down swing of her humor, best
yet daunted Mercutio, who will not ease
into getting by – either the rush of seducing
shy men into friendship or making intricate
Matisse cut outs with light blades or walking
till the blues beats back against the Albany
snow drifts, or faltering, betrayed by a turn
of the cloud bank, incandescent with despair,
letting cold eek into quilt-stitched boots.
K said to me then, “keep pushing.” She said,
“I know I have to keep going,” and signed off.
It's for whatever reason felt as cruel,
this spring not spring, snow on the stagger
bush like the pink fluting of pollen,
each of us quartered indifferently on couches
facing opposite directions, which Mecca,
which Paris, and which Lake Champlain,
the blue of upstate, all of us restless
with unhappiness like damp at the toe,
and no shock of warmth inside.

Distance

When I go to look for my monster,
she has laid her long hair

down in the corner of the room,
jeans too low because too tight,

shirt rising and hitching. At first,
she will not look at me or at her glass

or at her hands, trembling
like an injured bird in the palm

of the curb. She is forever
leaning on the wall, asking

that she not be asked to stand.
She holds her body

like a thwarted getting out
in a dark morning, her bag

still in the trunk. She is praying
for a wrist to lie on hers.

She carves wrong turns like veins
into whatever surface fits,

and we watch each other
as if that were a distance.

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Solitary Desk

After John Koethe's *Falling Water*

Tonight, I'll come home to a broken latch,
two sets of locks, dirt etching the inner door.
Tonight, I'll come home after being gone
for hours, visiting my parents' house,
saying hello, sorting old clothes, walking the dog,
who years ago I used to say was mine,
and then tapping lightly at a few ideas
at a strange desk that has the same plastic skein
of bark that peeled off in strips from my office desk.
My roommate likes to work at the kitchen table.
She likes the window there, I think, even at night.
She'll sit there for hours. I've gone upstairs
to work in my bedroom, then come down again,
her head in the same cradle against her forearm,
her short dark hair cowlicked in a rill.
She has a kind of Shepard boy loveliness, the face open,
the eyes a Turner shade of afternoon.
I like her even keel, her wit, her Yankee style.
I like her. I worry she spends too much time alone.
Though for someone who spends many hours
a week juggling the expectations of my friendships,
I feel in the end I'm mostly alone,
with all the selfishness that life affords.
I move from my peeling, solitary desk
to my solitary lunch to my solitary bread,
mayonnaise soft, and with strange vegetables
and smoked meat, and then the afternoon
goes on as I sort through my own hypocrisies
and paranoias and don't think of anyone else
that much at all. Solitary. Solitary.
To spend so much time alone, spend so much
time at all. I'm 26. How do I spend my time?
How much of it in reckless wastefulness?
How many years have I lived at desks,
frequently facing a terrifying blank?
I think of how a life is built from time.

I think of the kind of life my parents built
around the security of my father's skills,
children of academics, academics themselves,
who did not, could not, choose academic careers.
Their house is lovely, filled with Chinese scrolls
and antiques my grandmother left my mother.

My mother was an orphan at 35.
These days, that age seems impossibly young.
My parents' dog hunts frogs, stalks on the flat rocks
that loosely line the pond covered in bright green
feathered plants and irises, lotus in summer.
He always enjoys the hunt more if we watch.
He's not a skillful hunter, but it doesn't take much skill
to persist and persist if you're a dog.
My sister dug the pond in the backyard
the semester that she took off from school.
I remember not wanting to help her dig,
and the weekend my father drove up to take her home.
She was so fragile, in this house they built.
She is so fragile and still somehow sturdy,
my brilliant sister, built of a life I cannot understand.
She wants to go and live at home again.
Who are any of us to each other?
I want to lay down these thoughts for some deep feeling.
I want to feel more than just my unreal anxiety
that I have lived in for a year, for years,
the bottom dropping out, the pressures mostly
unreal, become my mother, father,
mostly past their anxiousness, in their prime now,
I think, living well, the long weekends,
the bike rides, the democratic book club.
I don't know. I want the life they have
I think more than I think I should.

I see it built around so many silences,
but they seem happy. Happy with Sunday
night TV and researching trips to Istanbul.
I wonder if we make them happy.
I think they wish we were less fragile, less longing
for ambitions they were forced to leave behind.
They made friends with neighbors, friends with
yoga students. My father teaches yoga on the side.
He gave up drinking alone, then altogether.
Writing this down, it seems unlike my life.
All feeling being what it is, what it is not.
I don't know them at all, except their shyness,
their humor, my mother's odd aesthetic,
my father's analytic heart, my mother's poetry
she never shows to anyone. I stumbled on it once.
I found it moving. You have talent she says
but what of talent. Why do we build our lives around ideas?
My sister is more fragile, and she has a better heart.

She loves and loves, loves strangely,
drives for hours to say goodbye to a distant friend
who moves to Spain with her new husband.
She wants that life and to have someone to build
a life around. How do we build our lives around
each other? My grandfather died in January.
My father's going to his service Saturday.
My aunt will stay in the family house, the house
he bought when my grandfather retired.
My grandmother loved poetry. She died so young.
So young, my grandfather living 20 years beyond,
drinking too much. Falling down stairs.
The ruins of a brilliant mind. Is this a family house
if this is the house you spend so much time alone?
My grandfather's house is full of grandmother's things.
I never knew her but I remember her
teaching us to make bread and knead and knead
and how she walked me to the end of the dock.
I remember, I think, dancing there with her.
My father doesn't speak much of his loss.
I wonder sometimes how much loss he feels.
The average children of distant, brilliant minds.
Average seems wrong. They both love ideas
and reading and each other,
and taught us of the world with books, stories,
songs of the west. They have been great to us,
if frustrated by our return to similar failures.
They taught me much about a worthy life,
even as I am spooked by its empty space.
How much of my life did I build from them,
though also much of it against their wishes?

My sister and I are spun out from each other.
My sister rarely calls, and when she does,
she rambles on about things that seem so distant
to her, to me, to where we might intersect.
My life is cluttered with people I know, I know,
and vaguely care about, but so it goes.
I sometimes wish I could step back
from this life, these friendships and carry with me
only the ones that seem to be alive.
I carry so many dead things on my back.
Why does it seem that caring is trying to care?
How do you care for people you hardly see?
How do you give them more time of yourself?
Last night, this morning, I woke up, flung back covers

in the eerie orange gray of night in a city,
covering the books that take up half my bed,
and lived out both the dream and the end of the dream
where I shouted at a poet, a somewhat friend,
“I’m not concerned by permanence.
I’m concerned about wasting time.”
It seems so obvious, and yet it’s true.
Last week, I signed up for another year
at this job I said I’d leave after two.
I was a kid, what did I know, but I told
my coworker I would leave and live in a family
cabin in backwoods Maine. I’ll be his supervisor soon.
Then he leaves in July. It will be five years next May.
With desperate budget cuts, there will be no time,
and time is what I desperately want more of.
And yet I could not bring myself to leave.
I told myself I was doing the right thing,
But I woke up feeling desperate and sunk
like I’d lived through a thousand mornings of these.
How many risks did I decide not to take?
The hollowness creeps into everything.

Didn’t Flaubert say we should live like bourgeois?
Stevens worked for Hartford most of his life.
He wrote in his uncollected prose in an article on
Surety and Fidelity Claims, “you see surprisingly few people.”
“After twenty five years or more of that sort of thing,
he finds it difficult to distinguish himself from the papers
he handles and comes almost to believe that he
and the papers constitute a single creature,
consisting principally of hands and eyes.”
None of us Stevens, but who says what a writer’s life
must be if we are willing to put in the time?
I suppose the tiredness eats at everything.
I’ve seen it eat at my parents’ lives.
I can build a temple to a life and live outside the door
and wake at rain and tell others this too is a worthy life
and inside there is only a windowless expanse
but I refuse to look. How could I know?
Sometimes, I feel home is simply where I sleep.
All other hours are spent at desks
and the years lived out traveling between them.
It took me years to not call their house my home –
the pond, the backyard, the feel of wood floors.
The suburbs never seemed a trap to me.
I’d go explore the nearby creek and watch the stream

and feel an open light slick through
like the water's surface tracing the rocks' curves
in sweet light ghosts of lines.
Glory to be God for – well – these things.
Dappled. The vastness there.
Sometimes I'd sit so long right at the edge
I'd slip off the bank as it crumbled beneath me,
the shock and pleasure of slipping
into water, flight of earth, the water gold and rock.
My family loved these woods, and loves them still.
Poetry, the woods, family, friends, ideas of love –
are these the bodies of my truest faith?
And if so, why do I keep such few sabbaths there?
Do not fix the body of your God. He must be everywhere.
Naming a vastness – it feels already gone.
I spend hours and hours at my office job
and then several hours reading and writing.
I know I'm not alone in this kind of life.
So many of us spend our lives online
in the strange liminalities with which we touch.
Yet so many of my friends seem flustered
and afraid by how few people that they see,
how they love each other, how full
their lives are of drinks and friends,
and yet how they find themselves sometimes
alone when they do not wish to be.
How can a life well lived be one alone?
How much of a human life is solitary?
My parents have spent much of their lives alone.
They've lived their lives together, more than half,
and yet how many hours did my mother spend
in the emptiness of the shadows in that home?

There was a room I built from empty moments,
but I turned down the sheets on the last bed
and burrowed till my toes touched books,
and all the strange uncommon tools became
a world where I would go again
and bury all my lost hopes in the wood
against a tree that had echoes of birch
or maple. All the names have left me.
I don't know how to build a life from this.
I don't know how to live without the limits
of my addiction from bouncing hour to hour
and trying to figure out ways to spend my time,
ways that don't involve diving into anything.

Everything is covered in the plastic bark
of desks and dinners and hours I push at
with useless fingers burned by the moment.
When did the practicalities taste of contempt?
I mean that every day I don't know how
I felt that this was enough. I write of desks
and tiredness and then go out and live it.
I miss a place where I could hold to the hope
of time instead of making it through hours
like our hands were made of plastic, to live forever.
How does a busy person live at home?
Rise early, rise early, mix water and bran,
and eat over an updated New York Times,
watch the women walk the dogs, the tiny
mutt with the strange walk, the heavy ones
shagging their way up the slanted walk.
Wait for the news to update itself again.

I sometimes watch the people on the train.
Those who are sleeping look the happiest,
although at night there are the college kids,
the happy drunks talking to strangers
in the place of rest they call a train.
I imagine a tavern where the drunks slip into
the yard and sleep under trees and wake
wet and cold and with a friend lying close along.
Who knows, the stars are full of an ache
that I can't hold off or express.
Where do I sleep? Half my bed is full of books,
and the books speak no sensual, thin-lined hopes.
They're just inert, although sometimes I've woken
with the page pressed against my right cheekbone.
I wonder if my father views his life like this.
I know he finds fulfillment in his work, being skilled,
building systems of ideas on better ideas.
I think he's happy with the life he's built.
I don't know if that means he has no regrets.
Look, there's much to be said for serving public good,
with time to write in the mornings and afternoons.
I just had hoped, I don't know what I hoped.
But that's my day – the hours of the week
seem stacked like paper, boxes filled with work
that sometimes seems acceptable to me.
It would be fine if I were not so tired.
Sometimes I imagine working in a park.
Maybe the woods would speak to me of summer

and I could share with others the love of that space,
the way light traces out the contour of rock
above rock so that we see a clarity moving above.

On my way to work, I see young women and young men
in khakis, blue shirts, brown belts and dockers.
It's not a suit as much as it's a shabby envelope
we shuffle on to meet the standard needs.
I hate the sensual pall of this downtown,
where the sidewalks in the city smell of nothing.
My office though is across from a garden,
with its bronze fountains and strange metal archetypes
and, in the spring, boughs of forsythia.
I am lucky then to be so close,
Lucky to work so close to a lovely place.
We go to jazz concerts there starting in May.
We drink sangria and talk of summer plans
as if we lived our whole lives in the light.
Don't think I am not grateful.
I'm grateful for my roommate's loveliness
and for her kindness and for her soft hand towels.
I'm grateful for the garden close to me.
I'm grateful for the dogwood across the street.
It's just that I keep living a life I can't live in.

How do I live in a space of hopefulness?
Do our obsessions leave such little room
for what should be deeply felt and falls from us?
How does one live so scarcely in a space?
How does one say goodnight and go upstairs
and find the bed and fall into a daze
and think the day well spent if we spent so little time
within the vastness where we have to live alone?
I think that lives must be built with care
for each other's tables by the window
and the moments we pause and say hello
and try to dwell in each moment with each other,
knowing the bank slides out under our gaze.
We must try again at vastness, know the luck
of finding ourselves a place of rock and water,
and figuring out the ways of time as we can.
I hope I can. I hope we can hold in that half light
that we can trap in whatever truths we find,
something both solitary and full of each other's hopes,
something with the vastness of an evening
where we have a few more hours to speak of light.

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Comfort We're After

So that in the early afternoon
the dog sits close by
when we have only lately
come to the backyard,
and the wood pecker,
red-toppered, tint of pink
on its shining stomach,
heads to the high branches
at the clank of the lawn chair
splaying its gray metal bars
in the current bank of sun.

The dog brings his dark head
to my hand and presses for
the right angle to use the scrape
of nails and bones that shift
as one might lull a fish in the creek,
but then my upper arm gets tired
from reaching sideways, and he is hot,
and affection moves into the shade,
not loving less (or only slightly less),
just practicalities.

The birds ease back to the squat
tank of a feeder on a finished square
of trunk. We all grow easier
with each other,
not given to fear after first
startling, or to stay close after
the necessary ritual, which will resume
when one of us goes back inside
or out, and sometimes,
I feel slightly ritualized.

Then, for no particular reason,
he gets up and moves his back
up to my hand. Perhaps the shade
is right now or he, like I, senses
the need to say hello,
to put down the dark bound book,
to give out our tenderness,
or perhaps his back itches him again,
as we need each other
less and more and less.

Music Scene

For Kathleen

You would sit at your desk, half turned away,
while behind you I could see the city sky
in riotous tropics of pink and gold,
a sunset in Houston that made the weight
of dust and air seem somehow, for the moment,
justified. Grackles would click and whistle in the ash.
Backlit by the haze and courtyard lights,
you'd riff on what you'd read of Joan Baez,
Yoko's postcards, Sara's canary yellow dress,
or the men who went backstage to visit Joplin
and who'd go home with her more lovely friends.

You would never play your songs for anyone
who wouldn't come and sit and ask you to.
But some of us would go and wait you out,
like birders in Brazos Park at dawn,
enjoying the hushed rising of the light,
but hoping for some sort of glimpse or call.
Sometimes you'd go chapters of Dylan's "Chronicles"
before you'd reach across for your guitar,
breathy, melancholy, of the city,
of its dust, your hair dark across the upper frets.
By then, the sky had turned some approximate of night,
a kind of orange-gray, even at nine.

Christmas Eve

The touch of childhood not really touching me as I reach
on the mantelpiece for the traditional accoutrement –
bent and ragged antlers, white felted crown, the Santa hat
shared between my father and the dog, the same hat

our old dog had tried to kill in the back yard the year
before he died, like some fuzzy cartel assassination,
and in my mind, I'm already mostly back at work
as I chant O Holy Night, O Holy, mostly for my parents,

and for the remnants of their last and their best belief,
that the death of their parents could, in this one,
this best loved time between them, briefly stop,
that there was something hushed and red and touched

in gold wide drops, as we each sing, really try to sing,
o always off-key chorus, the Holly and the Ivy,
deer running, the rising of, the red as, the ritual
of waiting, holding for the one thing, and for the merry,

and my sister knowing all the Latin and Coventry
when we were young; we sing o holy, o silent, o still,
o sweet, even in our missed strikes for tune.

Water-Under

Koi the most muscular,
koi the thick, square body
rising and close to the push
of its, push of its orange
gold flickering brotherhood.
Above the light lace wilt
of parrot feather, the heron sits,
and the koi cannot stop
it watching, only flash
depth-hidden, depth
their priest hole, their bell
tower, their sacristy,
like the square of branches
that I used to find a small
enough place to be,
my warren, my covert,
folded under a holly
and a tree whose bark
powdered orange-brown
in tiny points.
It was the safest place.
It was – I can't even know
now really where it was –
it was water-under, flush
to the sky, half a white
cedar branch away
from the kitchen door,
and therefore hidden by belief,
which is not good enough
for survival, I know,
but not much is in any place,
pads of luciana lilies flat
as rain, bottom only muck
and wasted flies, and golden
bruises rising, lifting
their tapping jaws
to the surface, then darting
sideways as fast as bone
as spear, we with our hiding
and unhiding, no safety,
pretending at stakes
and knowing them without
ever knowing what a heron is.

Linus

How in the failing light we meet our end
We come adrift of many special drifts of desks of bodies
I found a crumpled yellow slice of paper
stuck to the end of a drawer
where the drawer catches the inner wall
and then it plummets when you pull it out

but no one will, the drawer is locked
Linus, I couldn't hold your head up in my hands
they were too full of papers
I had to carry from the backs of drawers
my friend, my brother bodied,
and where was the unanswerable woman
they asked you to write a song for
you didn't know her
they told you she had a small mole on her right palm
it could have been an answer
for all you knew

virtuous woman – woman bathed in answers
woman bathed in lintseed
tell me, did you carry her body with your body
did you know her in that way
or maybe it was the trick of your body
as it moved against a desk
did you carry yourself to her unanswered

brother, I have held your body like a lantern
like a letter
I stuck to the back of a drawer, I shoved it hard
it is a light yellow glint
and tears in half
Linus of the sea, the wooden floating bodies
I will tell of your beauty,
brother, like the fretting of a desk
king of a world under your body

Linus, I am terrified
I could lose it all I will lose it
all I will lose it all, Linus,
Linus, are you listening

I wish there was a better word for you

I have given you my kindness
and then I will give no more of it
It is finite
It is barely breathing
I think I smothered every better letter
Linus, I implore you
my brain is stuck in this gap space

and the key has been rotted out with elegance
I wish the books didn't have so many drawings
of better more sophisticated hats
of better more sophisticated corners
to bury all my better letters
buried because I couldn't look at it
the desk I kept

Linus, let me write to you

Gone The Great Dark

Be a nice little monster, a good little monster,

a nice little good little thing.

Drive Volvos. Wear compact tampons.

Carry enough for your friends.

Keep to old kingdoms.

Keep the bleeding to yourself.

You are always hungry.

Even the last barrow is lit

by construction of a new Trader Joe's.

A sensitive monster.

clean little monster.

Repair the hole in your cape.

Bury your each beloved

with ceremony.

Haunt birches to the north.

Kitten boots are in, black

as the barrow.

Groundling,

believe in your happiness,

and blend your foundation.

Be of good cheer.

An amiable monster.

It was your kingdom once.
They looked for you on the roofs.
Sleep well.
Sleep well.
Keep the blood to yourself.
A good monster.
good little monster.
Sleep with one sex at a time.
Haunt lightly. Wear it well.
Always the hunger.
The bleeding stops after a time.
Bend only saplings. Accessorize.
Good little monster.
A well-tempered monster.
Keep your blonde
as blonde as sable.
Don't mourn too loudly.
Don't go to the roof.

Fukuoka

On the man-made beach
built from sand entirely
flown in from Hawaii,
where we could sit and look
across the bay to another
island, dredged from the earth,
plain as Nebraska
in this country of mountains
like stage backdrops against
the city, gray and blue,
ghostly as wading birds, vivid
as wading birds in rows along
the marshes, white picket lines
and one rising like a new king
to red pine, in that inlet
where I saw a small ray
ghosting beneath a concrete
bridge, the bridge gray as plaque,
but the ray, sinister, grayish black,
and the morning in its turn,
that inlet next to the amusement park,
red, dulled structures mountain-close
in old-playground neglect, seemingly
empty, but sometimes there were
self-conscious screams, a woman's
with a hint of laughter in it, on that beach,
a man would brush his light-sand dog
every morning, a tiny shiba inu,
her body poised on the rocks,
perfectly happy. We might all meditate
on this image as we would
on the last master of the temple,
orange and red-shining, new wood
to keep impurity at bay, to begin
again, although we can't, no sanctity
of salt and sun, imported sand,
calling a spade a spade,
jellyfish stamped with patterns
like the crests of lords
but dying just the same.
On that beach, staring at an empty
Starbucks cup, brackets of lit
windows a quarter mile across
the bay, I decided not to walk

into my end, not yet,
threw out the cup, and drank there
many nights after, and before,
pissing crouched down
against a gully tracing black
and smooth, listening for fireworks.

Stalag

Colditz, 1942

As I went into the tunnel, I could taste the heat
of all our bodies, salty as silt,
salty with fear, and the ceiling
shook above me.

My hands trembled. I wanted
to reach for your hand,
but that is not a man's friendship.

The tiny yellow lights swayed
in shallow loops beside us.
In a way, with the light,
it was more eerie.

The walls shuddered,
and sand slipped into my shoes.
You were in front. I could see
you running your hands along
the boards of the walls,
roughened and splintering,
but maybe that reminded you
of trunk, the wood that you knew
like a chisel and a cross-cut saw, catty-man,
man of the woods north of Terrebonne.

Sweat ran down my back and into my belt.
I knew your back in front of me
as I had known its rock-heat squareness
beside me the nights we spoke
in the colder dark. Those nights, all of those
nights, with flood-light echoes
sifting into the bunks, I could always
only see part of your face.

In the nights we didn't have to dig,
you told me of the maples
and the strange keen of the sled,
the dogs' stink, but their cleanness
of line, you said, and spirit.
Sometimes you would ruffle my head
like a dog's.

The nights we dug, we dug in silence
because you hated being underground.
My hands broke open
from the weight of wood and dirt.
We dug so hard I forgot where we were,
and I would almost break my neck,
I straightened so fast at the sound

of men coming to relieve us.
“Doucement, idiot,” you’d say,
with your gargle of Quebecois,
“doucement,” and you would shake me
till my bones grated,
and then you’d shove me forward.
You told me how, the last time,
you think your partner got out.
You thought he made it because
you never saw his body on the wall.
You had gotten trapped – your boot stuck
like a dog wrapped in loose leads.
You told him to go on without you,
but he was already gone.
They would shoot you this time,
you’d say, like the leads were on again.
The night we tried to escape, the night
we all were in it, twenty men snaking
their way along and breathing like
each breath could bring a tunnel down,
perhaps it could,
the lights gave out, but I think
the dark was better.
We pressed forward still,
the scrape of leather and knees
and trying to hold the walls up
with the force of our desire to just
meet the end of it, but not this end.
Not this end, but I could taste it.
I think someone took my hand.

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Wave to Earth

This might not work,
because many things do not –
fumbling at the end of a wrist
of someone sleeker, tan lines
on both your feet, loose hair,
the salt of it flinging into your mouth,
salt and the wet sand hard,
sand pipers startled by your first kicking
moan, and then just the speaking
of green-gray waves to earth, waves
to earth, the sun a silence upon
what always gave you over until
you forgot how to lie back,
remembered how she could not
remember your last name;
it could have been a new bitterness.
You thought the ocean,
when you were younger, had the right,
the sacred right, to take you, and so
you'd bargain, skin curling and taken,
but only so far as you remembered
the shore. It might not work,
because even in your hands
you pose a difficulty, because
she is impatient though she is kind,
because your shot of rum
ran down your shirt and you think,
even the sublime needs some
fucking help, needs some for a better
day that will not come
to you, just this one, her hand
forgetting your first name,
and your lips closed for the wave.

Another Way Out

I think you must have fixed the Delorean,
found your leather jacket, and taken off.
There was no time for notes or late-night calls,
no way to make dumb history understand.

Or maybe Tallblondia has need of you,
and you must take the throne and destiny.
You'll watch Roman Holiday and think of me,
the lost beloved on the common streets.

I wanted this to work out, but I see
how silence comes to balance everything.
I couldn't make you call, and I can't blame you
for undoing us the way you found you could.

So I won't think of you attacked by squirrels
or fleeing the KGB, your cover blown,
crouched in a safe house deep in the Yukon,
watching the leaves rot and the snow come in.

Prolonging Of It

The woman at the bar,
nut brown, slightly laminated hair,
short, steady, slightly stocky
body, slowly pulls herself
from an arched back into the man
in front of her. She leans over
and speaks into the bare curve
of his ear without changing
her volume in the slightest.
You forget how people can pull
that way, casual and coiled,
bright-toned, her standing
between his legs, a seduction
inevitable and not, his legs
as he perches on the barstool
moving in half-conscious loops
around hers. It's beautifully
on the table. His hands
lightly finger the stitching
of two shallow vs sewn
on her back-jean pockets,
and her tiny, rough hands
are sure as she leans over
once again and sniffs his neck.
You forget seeing how people
get what the body wants,
or that you could want it (lord,
now she's sucking the air
back through her teeth).
Fuck all the getting,
and the getting; they keep
talking of going upstairs,
but no one's leaving,
and why should they, poised
as they are on the prolonging
of it, and going only getting
them, getting you, getting any
single one of us, the stairs,
and the cold walk home.

Valentine

I am fighting my desire
to eavesdrop on your cards,
which is really not the same
as reading them, shooting
the shit as they are, rowdy,
like best friends sitting
on a couch in an intolerably
loud bar, yelling, is he coming
back? or I think she meant well,
which is good as fuck you
to the absent, and isn't

a valentine a gaudy shot
across the pleather, especially
one as sweetly crafted
as an inside joke of two
hand-sketched whiskies,
one saying, "I think you're neat,"
and all I would have to do
to catch the rest is to lean
over a little to my left
as I wait for another friend
who has gone for another
rum-diet, and I pretend towards
no oblivion being sought.

Myrth told me once I wanted
to possess, and although
I never knew it to myself,
I knew then when she said it
she was right, even those
who I love without any nerve
struck vibrato of desire,
even my kindest quiet. I want
to possess you mine
and mine, for you to have
thick swaths of valentines,
but them all to be mine

and ours, like letting
a lover go, and wanting
them then to be unhappy,
an impulse impossible,
unkind, but there like mildew

in the cabinet, there like
abscess, there like wanting,
and the valentines shouting
fascinating things I cannot,
will not, and want to
listen to.

Because She Couldn't See Herself Marrying Him

I remember her Simon –
blonde as anything.

I think a famous writer
said she ended a relationship
because of the way
he ate a hard-boiled egg.

If this is true, I suppose
his lack of staying power,
Simon's I mean,
more or less came
down to the same thing –

lips moving weirdly
over and around
a vulnerable rondure,
silky and decadent,
but bland –

and his laughter in the garden
in June, underneath forsythia
yellow as sun on metal
fretwork, sangria in his hand,
her small basket of food
as offerings between them,

and his stated desire to be loved
only as long as she would
want him and no longer

come to me now
as glimpses of the end.

I'll delete the pictures
of them in that garden,
and New Year's Eve,
both of them drunk,

her smile broad against
the shine of his blue shirt,
his paper crown sweetly
correct.

I liked him sometimes,
but he is gone to me
as any half-met friend

who moves to Carbondale
and stops answering the notes
I might not have written.

Inappropriate to mourn the loss
of him, because it implies desire

and really I have none, or not
for him, his antlers at Christmas,
and his drunken adjusting
of the orange of our TV,

more that I've never
said goodbye,
no, not even that,

just the softness of his
blondeness in the garden
and her smile in his lap,
the music breathy,
fireflung with sunset,

and all undoing
hidden like a challenge,
or an egg in the basket
between them.

Reaching The Sea

When I remember my head between your legs,
I remember that you tasted like tequila
and salt because everything tasted like tequila
and the rush of you was salt and moving, was
the way of air through the marshes driving towards

the ocean, not there, and yet given promise on
my tongue. What I remember was the joy of it,
even as I faltered and you were closer, and closer,
but we never reached the sea. I remember
afterwards your saying, "I felt nothing,"

which I recall as something more than speaking
to my thrilled, bewildered tongue, of what I could not
give you with my body, and when you kissed him,
today, today, as promise, and as rite, I saw
that I cannot understand, but also the joy of him,

and him, and nothing distanced. I know I have no
wholeness for you, no claim, no cause, no final vision
of the sea, but I can't help wanting to taste you
one more time, so I could remember what was there,
and bring you, if not this, than something more
than what I gave to you, whatever it was.

All The Other Places

I can't keep living this life, but I keep
on living it, living this here that is nowhere
near a tiny bar in a tiny hotel
in New Mexico, sarape rugs, faded neon,
a March-abandoned courtyard with black
metal flourishes, sea-twisted, unlit
table lamps, a decent local band,
an incompetent bassist, and incoherent
vocals, but the bar beautiful
in its not here, not here, not here
which is this black pleather chair,
stomach hanging over the board
of the laptop, green felt hat absurdly
ringed and dotted, but warm,
and the snow blur of my roommate's
idling lap top. I could be back there,
wearing boots and sipping Shiner
and walking back to a tiny studio,
past a dirt patched with the silhouettes
of horse stalls and tree stumps and sage
smoking in cold, Wheeler Peak gone
to nothing in a starless 1 am, a dream
which doesn't even work because she
would be there, not there, but her town,
her solace, 10 miles away in a half-adobe,
curled in a chicken-blood-stained purple
jacket, her husband on the way
back from the pee pee tee pee, I still
hear her half-laugh it, and I cannot
give up wanting to have her, and so,
and so – I am here, somehow,
and all the other places here with me.

The Blanketing Noise

With the white noise on my headphones,
I can now hear the snow outside,
or at least what it sounds like in my visions
of Russian exile or defeat,
or as it whipped through birches
near my grandmother as she
went hunting in the depths of winter.

I'm trying to write three poems at the same time
and lying not too badly in most of them
as I sit with my large cup of coffee
and the remnants of a carrot cupcake
on my ring finger and coating my left gum.
No pretense of life being hard today
for me – not even the bags of laundry undone

and the lies and my lack of desire
for anyone but the fictional,
and one sleazy Canadian army officer,
and the woman who took me up
the backside of Alta in the Sierras,
the ice splotched orange with life, no crampons,
just mountain brush blooming late blushes

of summer one hell of an imminent slide below.
She's getting married in Taos in a week.
But even, even that I can't regret,
happy with my coffee and the snow.
Dumb, fucking contentment.

Next Country

For Myrth and Kevin

When I imagine your love,
I think of the marmot
lumping its agile way
up to the tent for your shoes
and one of you half-in, half-out
the tent flap with a bedroll, laughing
and cursing or just cursing while
the other grabs the dark thick boot
back from the wilderness
while sunset pours out its steepness
around you and the mountains cast out
into evening, and then you are ten miles
or twenty miles into the back country
and the prints of deer fall off
as the sugar pine and the foxtail
overtake the Jeffery pine, and the air sifts
itself closer to nothing as you near
the next peak, your hands steady
on the rock as the valley is suddenly
green before you on the other side
of this certain height, and then later,
back towards Lodgepole, lupine
and yarrow slip into your breath
while mariposa and iris dot
like succulents for the deer
who are not bothered by the sound
of you moving swift and quiet
towards another trail head.
Perhaps this year Sangre de Cristo,
the sage brush and the raven
and the snow on these new mountains
visible as you lay out glass and mud
to be the body of your new home
and pray for an earlier spring. Perhaps
this year the next country. But always
the silence and the mischievous, the sweet
and sweet sorrow and the great honest
moving with you, and the open country
and what it could mean as you give
each other the wilderness and the mystery
and the ways you carry,
only the two of you, between.

This Yes, This

The taxi's already left or leaving
or turning the radio off while
you swipe at your phone, checking
your coat for every crucial article,
the taxi angling like a punt,
all city lovely, brute yellow,
brute chrome, and you
are leaning your cornered face
into the glass where everyone
pretends there are no mirrors
and no one catching a stray
smudge of pink and graying brown
as you flip by, as you lace the flower-
scored lining of your coat, shirt
buttoned two askew, bra itching,
and you humming towards an imitation
of last night's mixed thrum, the feeling
falling fast, lost, the leather creaking
happiness to the cold of the window,
this yes, this yes, oh brief glorious,
brief belt twisted, tired two-day
pants, vague, smoke of sweat
in your boots. It is unrepeatable.
It is the moment the cab
keeps turning up the hill.

§

Supporting Role

Palace Theatre 1933

You can exit singing
above the flats
to the left of center stage,
your hat held lightly
in your right hand and away
as if you were shaking
its hand goodbye.
In rehearsal, Cole coached you
“lighter, lighter, lighter,”
his hands a merry palsy
on the upright’s wooden cover.
He laughed, delighted,
when you tried to hold
some taut, leaning stance
with the intensity of vibrato
and defeat. “Darling boy,
you’re the failed suitor,
never to return, so this
is yours, your moment, dear,
but no one is supposed
to notice it too much,”
and when he stood
to shake your hand,
it looked to you
in profile
that he would have had
a dancer’s perfect line.
He had told you
“some of us are supposed to go
without regret – heroic, dear.
so take it graciously,”
back at the piano calling
“lighter, lighter, lighter”:
sweat seducing his collar down,
his forehead vulnerable
in blonde retreat.
So now you exit –
the chorus silent,
the piano silent,
his face a grave mask
at the baby grand.
You are measuring out
a disappearance

in the closing dark,
feeling your way
by the cracks
in the floor clotted
from repair, and then,
as you're halfway
through the wings,
Porter picks up
the next opening bars.

Pittsburgh

Driving over the bridge into Pittsburgh,
the bridge yellow as autumn, can you imagine,

the Monogahela tasting its branches
like a dog licking at burs on its hindquarters

below steel mills brick and mouth blown glass,
only the edges of their windows broken

like ice as it crashes into the rust earth bank
and back into itself, the mills looking

like they could stand forever. I was surprised
to make it, to be honest, to not finish somewhere

gravel on the stopping point of a green-tinted cliff,
my first road trip alone and to you, back

when I only feared the wrong right turn into
the small cramped lane of disappointing you

with its locked grates, chained posts, and the dead
husks of steel-heavy fuck ups. The yellow metal

arced in spokes against a ragged crawl as I drove,
oak leaves rotten-cherry brown on the mountain

where we rode the trolley nowhere, sliding
over a stadium and roads against the break

of shore like joints, and I watched you
and did not think too much of what I knew.

It's really only upon looking back that
the chattering of girders break into undone,

and it seems improbable that the one-way streets
could have brought me anywhere close

to a brick step where we talked in a worn-denim-
colored dusk and drank Lone Star

in your small stretch of block that would just miss
survival, watched your close coal brow fade

into curl and your curl tilt against the ragged knocking
of crumbling stoops, and it's all desolation now;

the windows leak thick, broken leads of ice,
and I didn't know the end, then,

but I feared it, like the slow moving
disappearance of a block.

Merewif

When I swam up to you,
your small floating round,
half cockle, a flash of weight
on the surface, the limbs of it
crashing in a song
reaching even to the bottom
of my canyon, singing,
a troubled one approaches,

all you could see perhaps
if you were looking
was a surfacing
of dulst, shining
and dark bodied.

I saw the crest of your hair,
creature of strange floating
coral, lashing, relashing
the body of it back
together with your hands.

I know what man is.

I know the white, strange
yellow-white of the arcs
of you when you
fall off your corals
and fall apart.

I know what land is.

I have seen the black heat
of the bottom breathe
into rocks that will
not be overtaken,
not for generations
and generations
of great singing ones,
mouths tufted with teeth.

I keep losing the songs.

Sometimes, the men sing,
but you are not singing.

I know what I am.

I have eaten men
in my time.

It was convenient,
and I was hungry,
and the men
were already dead.

I know drowning.
It is what happens
when your nature
becomes wrong.

All of my family
drowned high on
the rocks, too old,
too broken-scaled
to reach the next wave,
as if hunger had an end
that could be reached.

I am stronger for now,
but you are not.

Your hair catches light
and shatters it.

I know what light is.
I have watched
for a long time.

I used to try to help men,
as I would an old singer
menaced by blank-eyed
bone mouths.
Fanciful of me, really.

The bottom of my canyon
is silt and stopped ones,
some to white, some
to nothing.

I will know what your end
tastes of.

I do not think
that I will sing of it.

Belleoram, Newfoundland

You ran the mail sleigh to the bank
at Gander, runners bone shining,
the black, floating, furred creatures
thick at your heels, your felted
cap stuck with cotton against the cold,
having to piss but too afraid to ask
to stop. You would not leave this country,
you would die of it girl, a year, two years
later, 13, old enough in those days
to have to be woman and indoors,
where you still froze, and the smoke
ran into your eyes, and you never
outran any answers; you just stopped.
You just stopped. The runners
caught your heels in the thick lung
red burn of gone, runners whale bone,
bent rib, amazing what man makes
of his hungers, bones left for the scraping
of labs and half-red wolves.
You rode with your father on his two-day
mail runs, this run, skirt thick with snow
edging, warped wool, and watched
the Lewis Hills flicker like your brother's
black seeking as he watched your father
raise his hand to you, to you both,
but you still rode behind him, father,
to the edge of the long bay because
he was still fast to the cold of somewhere
beyond the thickened walls, uncontained;
perhaps you loved him, then,
until you died.

No Trace Of Falling

When you take to the woods,
put on the snow shoes bracketed
in ash; leave no trace
of falling bare knee, bare crotch
to the cold. Take no one
with you – not even she
who watched you lift the baffled
vole from the porch step
and carry it gently on the edge
of your glove to the cold
break in maple bare as red.
When you leave us
for a silence slightly sinned
against by your grasping
the long low branches
for the shake song of their fall,
do not watch for him,
light brown lank lines and a cheek
brushed with soft, forbidding bone
buried. You are the unreturn.
It is easier than knowing stone
and the bed bruised by knees
who will not sit folded, tasting
the space before fully waking.
You are now the last among
the catbirds calling stranger,
the voles sliding unknown
in tiny berths of soil.
You capture it so lovely –
the sought gone going that wants
only to never sink again. All hurt.
All wanting to hold the best of her
strange hips, her uncanny knowing
of the right time to look out into
the afternoon, to come back in.
You abandon beautifully.
You keep the points turned eastward.
You believe you can keep going, keep
his gloves working at dead thistles,
keep her running up the hill
beside the dog, matched rocking gaits.
You are heartless. You are radiant.
You hear only the breaks of sifting
pack and then the shudder of your breath,

which you would have left, have kept him
or her and never leaving and never being
here and never gone. Listen for it, and when
the last touch of what it catches the skin
at your throat, let it itch there; keep east;
keep the newly numbered coyotes
brown at the edge of this day
and watching, ever listening
for a real silence, deep as January,
caught in no body, no vision,
only perhaps her shoulder curving
into throat foot close, as she watched
the branch beat against the frame
of a silence distinct, a silence
unimaginable. When you go
into the woods, lift your vision
above the smallest glimpse
of the thin antlering of tree line,
and bless her when you remember
the time when you could bless,
before the thick frozen shelves
of morel and the start of hunger
and the bear stalking the surprised
buck. It is a peace, knowing both
the blessing and the end of it.
You do not look for him or her
or her or him or anyone
on the edge of the stands of pines.
You know them there, and count
the silences as shifts of earth.