

ABSTRACT

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Framed between the first poem, which recreates a drowning experience, and the final poem, which looks at the internment of a body, this collection of poetry is my attempt at understanding life and death as a continuous process during which the body, the container for our life undergoes various changes. In these poems I attempt to dissolve boundaries – from animate to inanimate, from human to animal, from one gender to another – while also overcoming fear of the body, fear of change, and fear of speechlessness. Most of the poems take place in a dreamlike state and thus make use of longer sentences and a more complicated syntax to create fluid boundaries in a world where the afterlife is always present.

DARK MATTER

POEMS

by

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But only a host of phantom listeners
That dwelt in the lone house then
Stood listening in the quiet of the moonlight
To that voice from the world of men

- Walter de la Mare, from "The Listeners"

Drowned

A dream of moving, too dark for memory. The stars
dangle on their ropes of light. I understand now.

Something has been lost. The voices are talking,
drifting through waves of color. How warm

the clouds, the silence flaring and gusting. The simplest
sounds have thinned to a line, washed away grain

by grain. This face, this pale fish is mine, weightless,
white. I could sleep here, fly away. Above and inside me,

the deep, deep voices rolling over and over in finned
whispers: Whose is she, lovely little girl, my necklace,

my scalloped eyelash? A storm is gathered in a bag of wings.
Orange. The voices swell to an impossible gravity,

their sifting tongues. My teeth are pearls, my fingertips
endless. *Come*, they say, the darkness deepening like a hand.

I

Dark Matter

What faith we have in the shape of things, that water
will always fill the glass, the print of lightning will come
before its sound, and the sky will go on forever,
held together by something we cannot know
but have calculated for: the time it takes light to travel,
the point where it slows to stopping, quiet, like a cold
breath cupped in the hand, the shape of sound said
years ago. In the thick dark everything is expanding.
The universe reaches out towards nothing, words
stretching to whispers, our reprinted dreams changed
and changed again. It will not be long. I can feel my cells
unreeling their indelicate ribbon of direction, the helix
twisting like wreckage, dumb metal shaped by force,
my young father bleeding as he stumbles along a darkened road
searching for the square glow of a door or window.
My mother is safe at home, my father finding his way back,
the space it takes them to find each other moving away
like an echo, my name erased syllable by fading syllable.

Faith

Not quite night, but just before
when the sun begins its dimming,
the sparrows roosting in the shadows
of trees, when I begin to go blind
against the lights of passing cars
doubled like ghosts and he appears,
raised by my headlights which give
a yellow halo to his being.
He is about to step off the curb,
sightless, his white walking stick
held out like a glint of prayer,
and he rocks on his heels, testing
the dark air around him, the sound
of tires on damp asphalt, the heart
pounding in my chest, terrified
for my own failing sight and this step
he must take, how quickly
it all could happen. And then I pass
and remember the deaf boy I met,
how that summer his fingers danced
wildly in his palms when thinking,
their rhythm same as this man,
same as the blood in my ears,
and I recall how I wanted to kiss him,
close my eyes and let those fingers
step out against my body.

The Collectors

Wednesday night and again they come with their broken violin steps, their shadows sagging uneven down the streets. Sometimes there are a dozen or more strung throughout the unlit hours, or the single ones appearing just as the sun turns to light, each one stooping to the same weight of trash.

I'd be lying if I said I saw them, what color their eyes were or the skin on their knuckles underneath layers of sleeves, only what they leave behind: the open bags, newspapers and stray letters scattered down the street, the life of neighbors let loose. Some nights, I've stood at my window and heard the lifted bag

shaken the way a dog shakes its quarry and I've listened to the glass fall bird-blind down the columns of kitchen scraps, the dulled clink among anonymous clink: pennies for each bottle, but I've never seen them. When they come with their slow, dragging steps, it's already dark, my windows locked nickel-smooth by night.

The Other Woman

Susan, the man yelled over traffic, lifting his camera to greet or capture the woman across the street, the crowd opening like an empty mouth around the sound of her name, then closing again. It would have been an ordinary moment, tourists, old friends, a divorcee discovering his ex-wife one last time— if not for the blur in the corner of the photograph, the other woman caught between who recoiled when she came within the line of the camera's lens as if she had put her hand on a hot stove or walked in on a terrible scene, then hurried away, lost in the crowd. She couldn't have known them, a stranger on the street, one of the hundreds who never let their faces or names be etched in sidewalks or the gray trunks of trees, and she's already disappeared even as you look at her, a melody you can't quite remember. There is no story, no life of a runaway or murderer, although you'd like to imagine her that way, retrace the lines of her face, color in the space between her ear and her jaw with a freshly licked thumb, remember her taste, a name you can call her by.

After Drought

Rain-slicked, the roads are slow going,
the wipers' back-and-forth stagger rushed

and unclear, so when the school bus ahead
stops and sends out its warning lights,

your car explodes with red and orange.
You expect it to be loud, all that color,

and terrible, like the videos of a grainy war shot
from behind pock-marked stockades –

the shaky camera, the gathering smoke,
men in the midst of gunfire running

for shelter, their bodies tensing and curling
when the building in front of them shreds itself –

but it's only raining here, silent, steady,
and the wipers continue their drowsy back

and forth, back and forth, showing the bus,
its puddled self, bus, then two small bodies

blurred. They're just two boys, alighting,
and its joyous the way their bellies strain

with the roundness of children, the way
their elbows do not yet know the angle of bone.

For the length of the wipers, they stand looking
back at their friends who probably sit two,

maybe three to a seat, and as the car blooms
with another flash of red, the boys, who,

after a summer of drought are not accustomed
to the cold touch of rain, who must think

that the coldness burns, turn, throw their hands
up in surrender, bend their small brown bodies

until their shoulders are even with their heads,
and run towards home behind a wash of rain.

A Love Story

Sometimes those bad-tempered gears
were so lovely, they could make a man
drop to his knees right in the middle
of the factory's red floor. At least,
that's the way they would tell it –
the sweet song of the whistle
still stuck in their ears, their eyes
blurred a bit by the glowing forge.
And it was sad, really,
to watch the great-grandchildren
who had once believed in them,
now all grown-up and raising
for-sale signs in brown yards
that would never be bought, trying
to explain that there was a better place
than this haunted Ohio town.
The old ones just sighed, laid their crushed
and truncated arms on the shoulders
of their living kin, and tried to tell them
it was so warm, so pure – that kiss
of the machinery on their skin –
it couldn't have been anything but love;
it couldn't last any less than eternity.

Waiting for a Plane

The crowd's restless. The smell of waiting is strong on their skin, stays like a thawed December. They don't care if there's wind and lightning rearing over the rim of the earth. They're drunk, or tired, and they want simply to feel the lift and thrust of air beneath them. Someone has talked a girl into dancing. Maybe ten years old, maybe older, her body is lean, every line cut clean and smooth. Unsure, she pulls her leg out, then up, and holds it along a cheek that blushes, her body opened like a blade. The business men laugh and clap. Her chest is still boyish and flat, but how they admire the diversion of her innocence and how she loves their applause, now turning leg over leg, hands pressed hard against carpet, now dipping, drawing her spine's spool back until the rest of her – all suntanned skin and silk – spills over her fingertips, arcs and then, as if she were reconceiving her girlish form from an impossible knot of flesh, she lifts her legs, a crescent over the curve of her stomach, and is suspended between two halves that seem almost to bend and kiss each other as lightning pales in the distance. Then just as quickly, her hips, her shoulders, her long hair are drawn along and over herself until the girl has formed a circle and now stands in front of us, whole again, her shirt lifted slightly, which she pulls down, quickly, shamed. But we have seen the soft, taut skin of her stomach, have already imagined the length of hand need to encircle her wrist or waist. The break before applause betrays us: We'd grant her anything, if only she'd ask.

In the Courtyard

She seemed to be younger, maybe his daughter, or his wife.
He gave her his head without hesitation, resting it against
her palms, allowing it to move when she combed too hard,
or when the teeth of the comb came to a knot,
so he seemed to be nodding in agreement with her, although
in the cold courtyard of the library, there were no echoes

though her lips, like her hands, never stopped moving.
The two of them were so still and quiet, his stiff gray hair,
her hands barely moving as she reworked each section gently,
tirelessly, her fingers rote along his scalp, they seemed
two lesser gods forgotten in this courtyard, in their slow
sense of time, the water from the fountain stalling in air.

And when she was done braiding his hair, he walked
to the corner of the courtyard and, on his knees, his upper
body bending between sitting and prostrate, standing, throwing
his hands along the sides of his body, and kneeling again,
he mumbled words that came to me as short, rough syllables
knotted in the silence, a deep, rich voice I strained to hear.

Waiting for the Amaryllis to Bloom

This time last November I was waiting for news of my grandfather, my aunt phoning to tell of his progress. Death, she said, begins with the feet, and each day would diligently check those two bony lumps under the tented sheet, look for the silver-blue to show itself, lichen-like, around the brittle edges of nail, then spread its sphagnum fingers until his breathing dissipated down the windless corridors of the hospital.

A change in trees, a sudden drop in temperature, and the amaryllis bulbs shine like skulls, their slender stalks blushing and swaying in the absence of wind. Half a world away, it is summer, the others are waiting, already blooming in their golden dust, whispering in time. I've never seen anything so beautiful, the flowers growing suddenly out of air, fading at a touch of the hand, and it's still winter, as if it had always been a dream.

The night of the fire I remember the cold coiling around my ankles and my neighbor holding herself up by the doorframe, her chemo-white knuckles bone white, asking me to take off her slippers. The sky was purple when she knocked, the footprints from her yard to ours barely breaking snow. It should have been a dream, me kneeling, taking each foot, her soles, blue-black, cold, crumbling in my apprenticed hands like husks of leaves.

Passed

In the dreams that keep repeating
it's the old teacher who has died –
passed it the word always used –
and you arrive through slumber's

tunnel just in time to see the red
triangle of his shirt, his shoulder
as he passes through a doorway,
his absence afterwards as palpable

as an empty glass at night. Words
refuse to work here. When the teacher
turns, meaning hangs like breath
in winter air and then he's gone.

His final lesson and you've failed.
Night after night you pass the woman
who weeps and wrings her hands,
stop once to console her, as if

her endless grief is the key, but get
no farther, dream it all over again:
the inconsolable, the glass that holds
no reflection, and still you go after

the dreamed-up dead, find him just
outside watching the bright blades
of cardinal's wings, their visible hearts
beating orange then yellow before

they disappear in a fog that stays
in the shower, your thin body trembling
on the edge of grief, and then your sister
on the phone saying come home.

It isn't snowing now, but snow
drifts over the road, flows over you,
your car, and for six hours, the blood-
shot headlights of semis hang

over your shoulder. It's difficult
to see. Sometime you can't.

It's silent enough to hear
your mother, a thin blue voice

behind the eyes telling you
to slow down, pull over, but
you won't let any car pass.
It's as if your life depended on it.

II

Balance

I remember it more in the winter-quiet, when the slow stack of the storm is suddenly uncomplicated, the wind smacking the tops of the pines with its open palm, their sigh and sway, while on the ground, silence so dense, not a flake moves, although you know if the wind were to come any closer, it would snap the heartwood in half, the sap loosened and lost in the soil. Those days it was so cold, the pony would be locked in his stall, waiting in his shaggy body, blood flowering along his muscles, the veins in his neck a map in bas relief, the tiny blue rivers on the inside of his ears: blood that warmed the barn and colored his winter coat cherry-red, blood-red. There are some things the body will never forget: a parent's drunken hand upon the shoulder, the hum of trees breaking under ice. I'd seen animals grow wild in an instant. A sudden sound, too heavy a weight and their eyes roll to white, their nostrils flare. Broken bones, a skull. This one was beaten, starved, and now was slow to trust. I'd bury my bare hands in his coat, I think to calm us both, and he'd swing his large head against me, the wind of his nostrils damp and warm. His fur was clotted with clay, snow churned mud, and his hooves too, needed cleaning, the rocks that cause lameness, the cloven pad packed with earth. In the light of the one bare bulb, I'd kneel, the wind making wide arcs of sound against the walls, the loft door banging. I'd move from leg to leg to leg, each time letting him rest his weight, my bent back a trade for this: the insubstantial skin, the muscles clenched and unclenched, the thin rim of hoof that held him above ground and its sharp, cruel edge.

Eviction

He had forgotten about them.
They had been so busy clothing
themselves, their shamed skins
in the noise of streetlamps
and car stereos, it had become
difficult to see them. But here
were two of them, once again leaving,
belongings packed and labeled,

the moving van out front.
He had to laugh at their vanity,
their persistence of naming,
of branding boxes with their initials,
and the male's insistence on washing off
his sweated labor. He watched
as the man emerged from the shower,
dripping, hands outstretched for the towel

that had also been packed.
Finally, in a space void of lamps
and chairs he could see, could
remember this particular artistry:
thighs ending in their clawless feet,
muscles unfurling along wingless shoulders,
arms held out for the absent towel,
the body's damp helplessness.

In The House of Too Much Love

The air stretches and shakes like muslin
warping around the spaces we move in,
the spaces we stand still in. There's the smell
of flowers – gardenias, I think –
but dirtied, as if they've begun to brown,
the blossoms dripping like tablecloths.
The hairs of my body stand up like needles,
like the beaks of birds. The cats circle,
touch noses, and a streak of blue stitches
a ragged curve between them. They jump back,
growl deep in their throats, their haunches
singed and smoldering. They will not touch me.

Dreams

The worst are the ones with the infants, all those nights
of missing babies I've forgotten somewhere – in the theater,
a store, along a street I can't remember, rushing back
to the thick depression left by exiting bodies and a single
woman watching as I pick up the wide-eyed parcel of flesh.
The greater sin – I'm never sure it's mine – and worse still
are the nights with the child I leave behind in its hunger,
in a trough of crumpled sheets, the swell in my breasts
unignorable as I lock the door. But I'm always too late,
the trains roaring out of the station in a rip of soot
and smoke, time reduced to the wing of a blackbird,
and I return minutes or hours later to the rented room,
the blue echo of the infant's cries stalled in the air
a gaggle of women in the hallway who tell me it's the poor
prostitute's upstairs, that someone has been called. Then
I'm the only woman with my child, an unbearable silence
as I wait for the whore to come down the stairs.

The Woman Who Moans in her Sleep

At first it's snow falling against a lamp,
the heavy curtain of birds' wings

blowing in wind blackened
by the oncoming storm.

It's a star extinguished,
the singed spot it leaves behind.

Trees unsettle their leaves, rub
their branches together, then break.

It's terrible and beautiful, like bone
scraping the bottoms of riverbeds,

like the scales of fish falling one by one
and then suddenly falling

by the hundreds. It's like lilacs unraveling.
Her neighbors think it's a cyclone,

hold each other in the bathtub all night,
down-pillows held over their heads.

It's because she lost her lover.
It's because her darling heard her –

heard the horrid sound of grass
turned to flame rising from her throat –

and went mad, jumped.
It's because she never had a lover

and can only imagine a soft hand
sliding along the curve of her stomach.

It's because she's seen a murder,
the knife find its way into a man's belly,

the blood find its way out.
It's because she's the one murdered,

her voice all she remembers,
the darkness rising up all around her.

Spider Bite

The condom's still in its wrapper
on the nightstand, sunlight glinting off
the foil. I wonder if it was blue this time,
or pink, or green, or if it smelled
like all the others. It doesn't matter.
He's crashing his whole hairy body
into mine, grinning like it's fun,
his smile cracked like the ceiling.
There's a spider up there. She keeps
disappearing behind his shoulder,
reappearing to watch us with all
eight eyes. She's larger than the ones
that dangle from the fixtures,
darker too. She's probably ancient,
watched hundreds of her hoards
stretch their tiny legs and balloon away
on silk, watched them toddling off
to disappear against wall and shadow.
Some mothers kill their young, devour them
at the first sign of deformity or ugliness,
and I bet this one's seen ugliness: the offspring
with too many legs and not enough eyes,
the seized ball of chitin in the corner,
and us, bodies pale as walls, eight limbs
clasping, unclasping, our terrible hugeness.
God, I hate his finishing grunts, his children
ballooning out of his body, how I am left
in the cold bathroom to sweep away the webs
they leave behind. I know she is watching.
When we wake, our skin will be purple
and damp, already swelling with poison.

For the Children We Will Not Have

Let's spark. Let's rub our kindling bodies
together and throw ourselves on the pyre
for the children we will not have.

Let's smolder and dance and conflagate
their non-birthdays because anything born
from us would be too headstrong, too hot-

blooded, too much like our naked writhing
to be anything we could raise. They would have
limbs in all the wrong places and never chew

with their mouths closed! For these never-children
then, let's celebrate, put our fingers together,
match-tip to match-tip and watch the flares

rise, until nothing is left. Then, let's hold
each other and sleep for all the nights
our children would have kept us up

with fevers and boogeymen and broken curfews,
and we'll learn to forget them, these salty ghosts
in the sheets. When we wash the bedclothes,

they'll swim the overflow to the ocean
where they'll be seahorses with bulging
bellies or an irritant to oysters.

Signs

Outside our kitchen window
the tattered screams of cat
or woman. The oven

ticks, ticks, ticks to heat. Just as
you cut yourself shaving
the bread rose too fast

and broke the bowl. In the small
cup of morning's egg, red strings
seize the yolk: a floating eye,

an unformed beak. You will
not come tonight. I will not
have to sleep with knives.

Nocturne

For three nights now, if you'd been able
to fall asleep, you'd have been torn awake
by those shrieks outside your window.
But for three nights now, you haven't slept
and you've been slinking around the apartment,
straying from your telephone, the creditors,
the husks of roaches in your last box of tea,
so even though it is after one in the morning,
and raining, when you hear the shriek again,
you're so grateful you almost cry. It's absolutely
horrible, that sound, somewhere between
the death cry of an infant and the open throttle
of a train, but you have to meet the beast,
so you throw on some dirty jeans and slip
through the back door to the parking lot where
the sewer water and spillage from the dumpster
settle, and there, around the hump of a car,
are two cats finishing their unholy union,
the male already disappeared leaving you female-
to-female, eye-to-eye with that small
pitiful siren, her fur matted and so coated
with mud from their coupling, you can see black
paw marks on her shoulders from where he
held her down. Defiant, tail curled and private,
the she-cat does not budge, does not turn
and expose herself to you even when the yellow
headlights of a car sweep over you, show you
standing there in the rain, hair plastered against
your scalp. She just sits there, under the cover
of a tree, staring you down, at your thin white shirt,
and at your breasts that hang unfettered, obscene.

Home

He died, I don't know how many times,
but the doctors kept bringing him back.
They told us they had finally fixed
everything, which I took as a sign
to pack two suitcases and come back
to my father's house. I wanted to be
a good nurse and cook. I wanted
to be a good daughter, but I had seen
his body when the sheets were lifted
and I did not look away from the tender
hairless parts of him. I had fallen in love
with the scar reaching down his chest
like the raised spine of a child he held
close to his heart, and I could not look
away. Out of the corners of my eyes,
I began to see other bodies. At first
it was black carrion beetles curling
and chewing themselves. Then,
it was the snap of the punishing belt,
hairy rats rotting in the walls, my first cat,
our dog dead these seven years, howling,
howling, and Grandma and Grandpa
in their caskets all over again, their smell
gathering in the gray hairs on his head.
I swear it never used to be like this.

III

Shirts Against Skins

God – those young bodies, those almost
hairless bodies lining up, matched –
not good against evil, but marked
against unmarked, shirts against skins.
They take up space easily, these halves
of boys standing across from each other,
spreading out in the sun at a signal
then falling back, man to man, their voices
deep, lowing to another, marking space.

Exquisite, the symmetry of their play:
the mirrored stop and pivot, a Shirt
floating towards his Skin, hands reaching
for shoulders, a waist. What pain,
what heartbreak could possibly lodge
behind those harsh nipples, in bodies
that know nothing of strangeness – two
falling as one, the press of their pairing
blanching the grass to silver?

Near the clothing that marks their field,
they land together, entangled,
their breathing slowing, mouths so close,
like shadows they could enter each other
and lose nothing, dissolve into one.
And if I could lay my strange, disparate
body in the alchemized grass, among
their clothes, I'd rise up looking like them,
smelling like them, take my place on the field.

Prometheus
-to Joseph Paul Jernigan *

How strange to see your body like this,
encased in ice, the downy hair standing on end
as the camera shoots strange, circling angles,
never quite looking at your face and yet
looking closely at the diamond-shaped
spaces between your legs, at the soft bottoms
of your feet, to see if you are sleeping
or simply playing at sleep, throwing off
the scent of the hunt, the heart slowed,
muscles stiff with static. This body
so beautiful, the old man who cursed you
when you put the gun to his chest,
who snapshots show sprawled by his chair,
open-mouthed, gaunt from years of farm work,
and then the chalked outline and the dark
shadow of his blood, as if his body had just
evaporated, disappeared into the soiled carpet,
would never have imagined that this
could be you – the vaulted, crowded brain
birthing itself, the optic nerve like lightning,
the heart and lungs unfurling like wet wings,
the intestines, the ripeness of your genitals
melting to the white thigh and shin bones.
And the colors – it just doesn't seem right
how bright, how beautiful they are,
untouched by regret, glowing and shifting
like fire, the body divided and divided again.

* Joseph Paul Jernigan was executed in 1993 for the murder of 75 year-old Edward Hale. After his execution, Jernigan's donated body was frozen, sliced into thousands of cross sections a millimeter thick, photographed and digitized, making him a part of the "Visible Man Project" that is now on the internet.

The Neighbor

Strange hours, scrape of the door
against its worn frame, he comes
and goes, shedding curses like rust.
And his women, one waits hours
in a powder-blue Buick on the street.
No matter where he does them –
bed, sofa, kitchen table – it's all
the same hard knocking, the women
aching like popped springs. They talk
rarely, although sometimes long messages
wind themselves around the machine
like dragonflies lashed at the edge
of summer. Nights when there's
no women, the walls betray him –
the clatter of his piss in the toilet,
the scowl of his feet in the tub,
the reluctance of water to touch him.

In A Bathroom On The Way to a Wedding

I've decided on the red dress, the one that almost looks like fire, that insinuates smoke and ash, and it's much too obvious as I enter this place, that everyone is staring. Even the mirror shows me, a strange shade of aquamarine, as not quite right, my hair losing its curl and turning to tangle.

In the bathroom, women become something less, the dirt, the nakedness in a place where thousands have already been naked. No one can piss and still be beautiful. I'm careful to lift my long hem, keep it clean as I read the etchings on the door, brash bravados *I lost my virginity here*, or declarations for some Danny or Jon, and the inevitable narrative that follows: "*slut*," "*you'd blow anything*," "*only a whore would give it up in a McDonald's*." Nothing is beautiful.

The sex must be horribly dirty, the smell of pine sol and hundreds of fingertips, skin pressed around the peeling stall door, the lock groaning against the fumbblings of adolescent couplings, always painful, always embarrassing.

My lipstick is straight, my hair, straighter, dull. I adjust my breasts in the mirror before leaving, sit through the wedding without crying.

I'm too old for such things, too awkward in my push-up bra to believe in romance. I dance with a friend of the groom from Florida, the smell of salt in his long hair and armpits. We both smell, nervous, alone.

I'd like to sneak off to some corner with him, not because he loves me or even desires me, but for the simple thrill of mumbling against each other in some dim half-light, half-wits, the measurement of flesh against flesh, his hand lifting my dress, on a table littered with left-over desserts or maybe hard against the bathroom sink, while the other guests, the grandmother of the bride are banging on the door, yelling, and I could etch on the inside of the toilet tank or the edge

*of a wine glass, I lost my inhibitions here,
was loved like animals in heat, here,
and it was never once beautiful.*

Apocalypse

Among the clutter of photographs of the dead and funeral cars with solemn-faced saints, my aunt keeps a list of groceries for the second coming: water, candles, cans of food and thick black cloth to cover the windows, tamp out the wickedness and the clatter of death. And of course, of course it would begin like this, the dark descending as night, a single minute sounding in the ear, almost unheard, like your voice thrumming through nightmares thick with sleep – a fruitfly staggering about the room, this first, this smallest messenger resting on my hand, patient as an infant, going back now, to the belly of the fruit: the spoiled bananas on the windowsill, the bread bursting with blue wounds. This kitchen has become a room of rotting. Scores of drosophila pull themselves whole and immaculate from the decay, flutter out into the house and beyond. Pale, pink-eyed I think I love them, their translucent bodies, their wings. When it is cold they sleep when it is warm they sing, asking nothing. I open my windows, leave my cupboards empty. *Let it come* I tell the flies. *Let it come.*

Self-Portrait in a Polaroid

Because it takes so long for the shadows
to swallow themselves and the lines
to appear softly, like footsteps that start
from far down the path and continue past you,
it's a different person in the frame
who appears. This is someone else,
and someone else who aimed the bulky camera
and pulled the latch that let the light out,
took in her soul, the camera's eye more clouded
than before. Yes, something was taken here.
The light says as much, falling in vertical bars
like soundless sheet music across her thighs,
tipping to rise up her slender torso, melting
to the circumference of her breast,
pinked, the colors here indeterminate,
different from her underwear that is pale.
And from under her hand, more light
fanning out from her fingertips, yellow
then gold bands, colors old and striated
like the halo of an ancient icon, as if
she holds it under her palm, perhaps
taken it off for this portrait, the gold paint
flaking a bit as she did so, falling
in her hair, her eyes even as the sky rumbled.
Pale and still she posed, back arched slightly,
but the picture stops, angled from neck
to shoulder, nothing more to tell who
she might have been, limbs clipped, no face
that could lift her from the wreckage of shadows.

Grief

As you undress me in the graying dark
of a hotel room, the curtains pulled tight,
they are already rolling back
the earth, the tarp that covered the hole,

and as you lower your body into mine,
they're lowering my mother's body
into her grave, a slight snow swirling
around the cut edge of grass and dirt.

Sometimes I think I can lose myself
in the dark threads of your eyes, the iris
etched like living stone, but your eyes now
are unbearable. You are thinking

about conception, whether anything
will come of this impassive grieving.
What is there to say? When I hold my hand
up to light, I see through to bone.

The Yellow-Jacket

It's November, the ground frozen
for Grandfather's funeral and too late
for yellow-jackets. Hundreds

have already given up, their corpses curled
like commas in the windowsills and corners
of rooms, but still there's a tapping

at the window, this last one drumming
against the pane of dusk. Tiny carpenters,
winged workers, they were long a problem

for Grandpa. As he matched
floorboards flush with their neighbors
and hung windows square in the walls,

they built their house in his, buried
compact combs in the deep of his home,
hexagonal windows opening on nectared suns.

Their bodies are now everywhere from summer,
impossible not to tread upon, not to destroy
the corseted carapace, the conversation of wing,

and it's growing dark outside. Shadows
busy themselves with burying the crushed
black and yellow glory, silence the journey

beyond the window that insists each
climb the glass until it falls from exhaustion,
and this last yellow-jacket goes on, without

display of grief, without a moment stolen
as the others drop away, as his pace slows,
the silence settling on the floor like dust.

The Gift

It was for my ninth birthday. Or my tenth.
The time of year that is neither summer
nor fall, but the sun rises large and bleached –
the first time I saw it rise. The back of the car
filled with an orange-white light. I was promised
monarchs, the bright chalk on the windowpane
of their wings, and I expected their thousands
upon thousands to sound in the ear like the comb
pulled through my hair, all their weight to break
the heavens, the oceans to heave their salty
load upon the land. I was promised monarchs,
but that morning, none, not even a paper-wing
disappearing down a swallow's quick throat.
Just a water snake sunning itself, and the man
who picked it up, his silhouette as he turned
and turned, the snake pulling farther
from his hand before it glided along the gray
sheen of lake and sank without a sound.

Preparing the Body

One must first learn to love the fire-cold touch
of the dead, the stiff joints, the slack and wind
of the jaw leaking out that last silver syllable
into the deaf ear of time. The body given up,
cleansed of dirt and excrement, the blood
removed by bottles on either side, one draining,
the other filling, so the corpse, the carcass, this
rack of meat and bones is the slender middle
of the hourglass through which the flux
and offal of living pass, are touched and changed
completely: what we have, and then do not.
It's an art, the heart and lungs stilled, the pale
skin touched by the mortician's brush,
the practiced movements more quiet than dusk:
the gentle handshake, the sweep of the arms
like weeping to usher out the griever, close
the doors, leave the body to measure out the time
when the stone will be rolled back and the voice
from the ascending motes of dust will say, *wake, rise.*