

ABSTRACT

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AS THREAD

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As Thread is a collection of poems which keeps account of the categories and modes of loss, using the death of my father as the catalyst, and how memory, as replacement, unravels, tangles, and mends—as thread does.

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By

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I

Babel

The snow grazing the tiled roof of the Methodist church
murmurs a language too ethereal—no,
too dead, once spoken
by the snow women swept from the sidewalks of Stalingrad.

What is *Heaven* in the vernacular of snow, of horses or grass?
Or in the vernacular of the woman you made love to
who wouldn't look you in your eyes out of fear
of her own face? Her mouth

shut—such possibility in silence. Nonetheless
say the name of something which isn't yours. Begin
with *breath*. Say *breath*. Again *breath*.
Say it as she sleeps naked, almost fetal,

say it as she exhales, her breath no less significant
than the breath of the Palomino and piebald mare,
their hooves cracking through a crust of snow
to reach the still living shoots of grass.

Passing Through Jacksonville

I think of your pretty teenage face
and of how good it was to be young
and to fuck where the trees are ever-

green and evening lows of 65 keep
the air cool so the girls playing tag
don't sweat in their navy jumpers as

their feet land hard and awkwardly,
their fresh white sneakers unclean
in the dirt, the 3 AM dirt I had tasted.

After The Farewell

James Tissot, 1871

Tissot didn't paint the man's complete mouth,
only a fringe of upper lip visible
from behind his left arm

slanted over the crossbar of the wrought iron gate,
his right hand bare so, through the bars,
he can feel her palm grounded in his.

The contrast between the muted black
of her lace glove and the paled flesh of his hand
executes their separation. Beyond the perimeter

of the scene, the gate has a latch
permitting the it to open and him
to step onto the sidewalk with certainty.

Washington, DC, 4 AM

Steel sentries keep vigil over the barred-window row houses
and the city has reclaimed its calm, its quiet, even
the near-elderly Haitian woman walking a small dog
on 11th NW says nothing to herself, her lips
purse together in the way that age and firm practice will
merge into constancy as she turns the corner to Euclid
overlaid in street-glow as if she might never exist beyond it.

Sudor

The season of flesh and mouths
should not end with the heat
that marks August with the salt

of sweat, or with my mouth
needing the drop of sweat on your
neck and on your cock, needing salt

to remain ever on my lips. Please
call me *your salt* as if each
word was a segment of a finger.

The Clot

A stone thrust from the most rudimentary sling,
a cut of goat skin, a cord, the body's momentum:
the stone will land where it will.

Bone, organ, meat: human as study, an anatomy
model, glass exposes the body's interior workings.
See *Figure A*: the heart, the size of a fist. See its chambers.

Or human as paper and curls of limbs, arms embracing shoulders.
To wait is simpler than a child's thoughts or a pool of water,
or love—father's helpless love—simpler

than the long vowels and flick of tongue against my upper teeth
as I mouth love, father, as I mouth thrombosis—
the coagulation of the red humor, nodular and quiet

and evicted from a deep vein. I fear it, just as I fear
night will come undetected. I think, how we die
in the language of night. The hard mass of platelets

entered the heart and he seized brain dead, and in ninety seconds
was completely dead. A nurse uncharged the defibrillator,
a doctor slid his hands down over the eyes, shut him into night.

The Buck

Its carcass is intact, the bullet wound
hemmed with handsome crimson

and will be bibbed with black flies,
their wings' continual hum

resembling the chatter of guests
of a party that should have ended hours ago.

Thread

A few stiches could mend the burn hole in my skirt
if I'd ever learn to sew: another reason why I called.
Voicemail answered the generic female recording.
You'll call back when your mouth is lonely, a cyclical need
which mirrors the moon's waxing and waning,
the daily on/off switches of streetlights.
When the morning timer shuts them off, moths are left dizzy
from the screen of the artificial light. In a nature film,
I saw grizzly bears traverse the upper slopes of the Rocky Mountains,
fumble over crags and gravel, knock over small boulders
where the moths rest, and the bears swat them into their mouths,
swallow most whole. Nevertheless, this is not the elegy:
the darker the sun the warmer the sunlight, Orpheus singing.
How exquisitely Orpheus's head sang, each word
a grain of sand lodged in the pipette between the bulbs of an hourglass.

After Der Kuss

(Gustav Klimpt, 1907-08)

She yields into him, into the color blocks
of his robe of gold, black and white,
and her skin a mere continuance of his.
The viewer doesn't know his face, but rather
his left hand as it sweeps her neck. I imagine
his lips discover the shadow behind her ear.
It's been too long since I've been kissed with honesty.

Interiors

It could've been possible for snow
to contain joy within
its pristine coldness.
Now, even if it fell delicately,
it would soon be spoiled
by dirt and footprints.

*

I miss his eyes only
because nothing here is blue.
White, continuous,
keeps me from sleeping.
Blue is the perfect sky,
water and him.

*

He told me once I was beautiful,
a beautiful person,
not just a body.
He held my face in my hands.
I wanted to believe him.

*

I don't want to wear this white anymore:
a gown tied by thin strings around my neck
and at my breasts and hips,
the outline of my spine visible.
Outside it's snowing.

*

Sleep is something we do
and something we are. Asleep.
For two years, I wanted to sleep.
I forgot how to close my eyes for anything
except a kiss or to silence myself.

*

His eyes were always uneasy,
a blue touched by gray. In his irises,
I was a shade, drawn
further under water
and scared of any color not blue.

*

I can still taste the charcoal, blue pills,
and flakes of skin under
my fingernails. My fingers
are good for nothing now except
pulling the paper sheets closer.

*

He once told me
he was concerned with how
my eyes carried no life—
this is not how he said it.
How did that happen:
did their color drain down my cheeks
without me noticing?

*

I cannot touch this snow. Each flake
has one chance only.
I don't want to think
the February sun doesn't care,
but snow is here now
and will be tomorrow.

Abatement

One poem begins with an infinitive:
to *see*, the father in his casket
against rosy velvet and its speaker
is relieved to see his father dead and permanently
the unhappiest man he ever knew *well*.
And as I glanced into my mother's bedroom,
I thought I saw a man with her beneath her pink sheets
and didn't know who he should have been: father
or that other, perhaps a child's figment,
Uncle Babies, cigar-juice-stained
lips and the hair she brushed back
as they kissed. Father sat with me in the pink armchair
and uttered that people can't love each
other anymore—or less—as if he had meant to say
accustom. And sometimes it did seem simple
to love the man who scooped me onto his lap
and called me *precious* as the porch swing swayed.

II

Christmas Eve Eucharist

Emmanuel Episcopal is greened
as though Christ measures devotion
by the size of the altar pines

enfolded for the blessing:
Alleluia the Child is born!,
the voices of the congregation

a cacophony of praise,
an acknowledgement that we
are born naked and without choice.

Bones

Our common bones
portioned and split

into father and
the daughter who he

cribbed in his arms,
pressed against his lips

as he first spoke
my name, his voice

as impermanent as
the dust on a table,

or the dust of his
bones within a furnace.

To Creation

May I come into being again as an infant
nuthatch that could rest in cupped palms, or, if
the hands were to close around it, would be snared.

Sordine

Frost veneers the petals of
scrubland crocuses as
if preservation is the frost's

perennial art, each petal
tempered, such things
silent—the lips of one

lover submitting to those
of the other, the body's
lexicon acute and impenitent.

Peterkin Mountain

At its pinnacle, the trees
no longer curve and reach

but stand as if temple pillars
in the sanctuary of June dusk,

stand in the silence of fireflies
and of the stars crepuscular

over the ridge, a silhouette green-
black against placid violet

Even with a full moon,
these colors will never converge,

and the Appalachian sky seems
too tangible, the separation

between the sky and us, our hands
unable to touch the dead above.

As Ash

Father without body.
Without form. Father
sealed within one
vessel—urn: sealed
within one syllable—
urn. Father perpetual,
the impeccable cinders.

Name

A boy presses his face to a frost-crowned window,
exhales, the glass sheathed in breath.

He watches his finger write his name
in the plain cursive of a child

who has learned this new shape of his name.
He spells each letter aloud, each elongated on his tongue

and paced with every forward stroke. He writes
his name almost as one motion and is proud to do so,

finger clearing away the vapor, smearing the pane.
When the halo of breath vanishes, the trace of his name remains

filtering the gray light of an early March morning,
and in graphite's flat gray, the gray between grief

and faith, I've scrawled my name,
over and over, engraved it into the paper as

if it were carved into a bronze placard, carved
into Saint Peter's list, name carved without adornment.

Burial

I believe in the Holy Ghost and that the old breathe ash, each breath patient and ready. Is father mere ash: fire, body and bone?

Or the mountain clay mother unearthed for his grave? The spade unearthing clay, alone she unearthed his simple grave. Holy Ghost, ashes and clay,

no clay is as pure orange and reverent as the clay she unearthed from the mountain. The spade unearthing clay:

her hands unearthing clay. Alone on the mountain, she unearthed his grave beneath the branches of oaks. Alone,

she unearthed clay from the mountain for Father and the Holy Ghost. And the old celebrant spoke: *Be with him Holy Ghost*

as she crossed her chest—*Father, Son, and Holy Ghost*.
And I crossed my chest—*Father, Son, and Holy Ghost*.

I believed in the Holy Ghost when mother took handfuls of clay and returned them back into the earth. Ash and clay. I took a handful of clay

as I first breathed father's ash. And mother fell to her knees with armfuls of clay and Holy Ghost. *Holy Ghost, I'll only breathe his ash.*

III

Ache

For Ai

The black goat's kidney still floats in the bowl of broth and lemon rinds
as flies assemble to its corpse roped to the killing post.

The kidney was never thrown out and you didn't remember
if the goat suffered. It didn't: it was already slaughtered

when you and I entered the poem, the poet and reader
compressed into one *I*, a shared body bent over the bowl.

Our face skims the broth as we inhale
hot citrus and rough herbs, then our lungs release.

With enough breath and ink, we can turn an ache
into field crows or a butchered hen, its right wing cleaved,

or we can turn it like the ignition of a pick-up truck
left to rust beneath mottled sycamores.

At Mill Meadow

The seventeen-year cicadas surfaced when the milkweed blossomed
and the forsythia had lost its yellow florets, and when the night
still arrived readily with its crescent of moon,

they emerged translucent from their mud turrets,
encroached on the oaks and evergreens, groping the ragged bark
out to the branches where they'd harden into mature form.

I'd go to the meadow to be with the first boy I wanted to fuck,
but there I was nearly content to be among the leaves and dandelions
and to lie outstretched beneath the loose canopy

soon to be taken by cicadas, their wings bulging with amber veins,
their aggregations: staccato, up-slurred, and particularly aggressive.
He took my hand, put it down his pants

just enough to remember he had been taught his shame in Bible school,
and the cicadas would mount and mated, thousands
of opaque red eyes strikingly blank as they latched.

Elegy

Shirley dines without company and speaks over-pragmatically to order the New York strip and a glass of a dry red wine, unable to name her old favorite. The bartender serves Shiraz, and after periodical sips, Shirley comments: *This one is similar, but not the same*. She'll call herself half-brained, then ask the bartender to try again. *I'll remember it by taste*. It is certain that we will lose the everyday details as it is certain that death will steal everything except our stories, while remembrance is left in drawers and on dresser tops strewn with other objects: a small wooden box, a half-used steno pad, a pair of my father's glasses.

Wisteria

I was too selfish to look at something so foreign and natural,
its quivering peridot leaves and tendrils lacing the lattice work,

the woody stems overlapping, the whole vine
extending up and outwards like crooked fingers towards the sun.

It was miserable when first planted and anchored to a trellis,
a haggard brown stalk held upright by twine.

I fastened it tighter, though could've torn it from the soil
and discarded it in the brush pile. It seemed right

to sympathize with its pathetic creep as if it was an elderly man's voice
asking a nurse for a glass of water, then to bring it to his lips.

Father's Shirt

A mustard yellow flannel button-down crossed by tan stripes
not laundered after its final wear so the remnants of his skin
might touch mine. The shirt itself is immediate,

placed between the pillow and sham on the empty side of my bed.
With it there, we almost still can lie side-by-side
as we did when I was a child and couldn't sleep without him near,

or rubbing one of his shirt tags as I felt my way into slumber.
I taught myself again to get through the night like that, with the shirt
twisted around my arms as if it were more than fabric and thread.

Other times I stretched it out across the carpet, its arms extended,
explored it for strands of his hair snagged on a button or seam, for one
fine black hair, something else besides this shirt.

And if only I could— with all certainty—preserve the exact way
pulled and slacked against his chest or the fit of the cuffs,
or the way it was folded after his corpse was undressed.

Taking the Train to Chicago in August

The specter of Pittsburgh penetrates the sleeper car,
four hundred and sixty-eight miles until Chicago.
Only my father, me, and those waiting
for the next stop remain awake.
Father and I sit in the club car eating walnuts and pistachios
while Amish families sleep on vinyl blue benches.
Across the river, neon spotlights break the outlines of skips
and furnaces and the bridges of the Golden Triangle blaze
on both the black water and sky.
The club car is no longer serving beverages and hamburgers
and we drank the last two beers from our cooler hours ago,
somewhere when the rails and the Potomac parted.
Morning, in Gary, Indiana, we sip coffee from Styrofoam cups
as the train creeps between the rusted carcasses
of U.S. Steel mills and shipment yards.
I ask him, is this industrial America?
Is this America without the Appalachians?
He says, America is the railroad
and tells me about the West, Alaska, the desert at sunrise,
riding the rails from Cumberland, Maryland
to Seattle, through California and the South,
how he saw America—places I haven't been yet.
We watch old black men passing cards in another hand of pinochle
and skinny Japanese children tumble through the aisles.
Now I want my father and the sway of a train of the rails.

Watching the Minnows at Knobley Farm

Sister leans over the rust-
brindled tank, her open mouth
so near to the water she
might swallow the stench
of the minnows as she first slips
her hand down into the water.

Bucolic

Your rawboned finger is scratching the mud-
stippled paint off of the front door jamb
of the farmhouse, splinters draggle
the chewed-down fingernail. Perhaps you do this
expecting your man and the bassets to turn the corner
of the shed, inside a fresh doe strung up to drain.
And perhaps you fold your arms across your breasts,
their raw weight steady behind your forearms
as the wind kicks up ocher-yellow dust
and a horse brays, as the sun begins its descent
behind the ridge, the sky threaded with orange and rose.
Perhaps, you'll give your mouth the way he wants.

The Butterfly

The umber and faultless-white tipped wings
of the butterfly trapped between the glass
and the wire screen of the sunroom window
beat less and less as it inches over the june bugs'
shells piled in a corner of the sill. I could've
released into the outside as if a butterfly is no
less powerless than a man who resigned on sobriety,
who keeps two beers behind the sugar.

After Hass

The act of *dismantling* the bread implies
the delicacy of her hands.

They're wreaths of twigs that could break
easily in the mound of bread, or

each could sprout new and feminine leaves,
soft like spring-light or *plaint* against the curve on one's lips.

Her shoulders are small, each like a crescent moon
concealed by the lights of streetlamps and high-rises—

she is not suited for a city,
a country table perhaps, a pine table,

cerulean paint chipping from its knots,
the bread, warm and hardy, in the center of the table.

The kitchen must smell of honey, thyme, and parsley,
though she must be scented by vanilla and rose,

except for her hands on which the aroma of autumn
wheat lingers. The bread rests on a swath of red fabric,

or perhaps the fabric is embroidered with pansies and violets.
Here the bread will wait to be sliced.

Let me not ruin her further
with hands strong enough to knead dough.

Keep her hands tracing the notches of his spine
after they made love:

keep her as an object for the reader to consider
the relationship between this woman and loss.

Let her be free to be lost.
Let her be free to remain his small violent wonder.

New Year's Eve, 2010

Our foreheads met first, then lips.
You tasted hints of pepper in my gloss
and strands of my hair caught between us.
On television, the mass in Times Square
sang Auld Lang Syne off-key and obscured
within a blur and glint of confetti.
And when we did remove our party clothes,
the crowd had already dispersed,
New York left with tattered streamers
and trashed plastic hats in its streets.
My sequin dress hung over the bureau as
if never worn, still you loved that dress
and how my body sparkled.

Coda

Father is the impression in the beige armchair,
evidence of his living body and how

miserably handsome he was when
the table lamp was turned low, his face

in angles of shadow. He called his stillness
thinking, sitting nightly hours in the dim.

Nonetheless, it's possible to write my father
in present tense, to rewrite him: *father is*.

Inside the Garage

In the rafters, a gray spider threads
its silk, anchors one line to a pared crossbeam, another
to a nailhead which had mantled carpentry tools,

the screw-clamps, levels, and the crank-drill abandoned
in aluminum bins. Father's workbench, its unvarnished planks
disassembled and given away as firewood. All

disused for years, useless to a man whose hands are cinders.
But it's easy to picture the shape his hand made around
the handle of a hammer, the hammer as it was and will take no other form.

The Bird

It sings from somewhere in the cedars.
It isn't the noon catbird or the robin at dawn

ready to snag an earthworm from its burrow
as I did when I was a child and kept them

in a Mason jar filled with soil and coffee grounds,
all the same, they starved, the contents of the jar

a sodden mound beneath the peonies.
By evening, ants were already sifting through it,

collecting each worm. And I've watched
a colony of fire ants claim a dead bird

on the porch, hundreds riddled its pieces,
its blood-matted feathers strewn across the flagstone,

and so I dragged the garden hose across the lawn,
washed its remains away, the water running in rivulets

between the stones. A man of experience
said poetry expresses either love or loss.

For which did I begin with a bird in the cedars?
Listen to its song with naked opinion. Listen

to each note ascend as if to remind us
that our voices are cracked stones.