

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: THE GREEN COOLNESS AND SHELTER OF LEAVES:
POEMS

April Naoko Heck, Master of Fine Arts,
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This collection of plain-spoken, free verse poems is primarily a means of knowing and remembering two late family members. The first section is a series of poems tracing the steps of my Japanese great-grandmother, Obaasan, as a Hiroshima survivor. Through research, conversations with family, and imagination, the poems in part interweave a narrative with the process of discovering this narrative. The short, bridging second section consists of poems that deepen concerns about the body's vulnerabilities, and suggest physical experience as one way of relating. In the third section—traveling from east to west, from distant to recent past—a series of poems uncovers a childhood of both nurturance and instability, complicated by economic hardship, issues of identity, and my father's addictions and sudden passing.

THE GREEN COOLNESS AND SHELTER OF LEAVES: POEMS

By

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Dedication

For my mother and sister

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Spark

Use room-temperature water, never ice. Skin holds heat so you believe you're more badly burned than you are. Your singed hair crimps and smells of fried eggs that once cooked on the farmhouse gas stove. Bathwater runs faster than a sink's, so you must kneel to extend your face under the faucet. If you'd followed directions, you could have seen the fields later instead, your hand palming sugar to the horses.

It wasn't a bang, more a whoosh from under the griddle. You don't know which sent you reeling back, the flash or pressure, heat or fear. Obaasan fell forward but that was different, that was a great wind, that was outside, you're in a house, your clothes are on, you've hurt only yourself. It's hard to remember the spark in first-person, the tipping, if the arms flew up or down. A spot on her cheek continued to weep, dabbed with white tissue. You wanted to see fall leaves turn, to pick apples in the hills.

Your sleeves are damp at the wrists, you're given oxygen. The warmth of the skin is normal, your face is there, there really is no mirror. Long breaths. Think of mossy stone stairs you'd wanted to walk down to the river, the cold tin rush of water, a wooden footbridge. The truck ceiling's strange, metallic, with inch-long, crosshatched ridges. Maybe it's what your dad saw when he lay like this. Could he feel his face? What if there were no trucks? Who'd save you, wandering between a canal and sweet potato fields? They say lilies bloomed in the ashes.

I.

I didn't look for them:
they came like ghosts
looking for me.

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The Bells

—Otake, Japan, August 6, 1945

In utero, did my mother stir?
as her cells divided, tiny buds of limbs
emerging: sprig, branch, vein, opening
and closing, present and tense.
My mother a nugget. Boygirl. Silken bean.

In utero, did she hear?
when the bomb dropped twenty miles away
and the house's paper screendoors flew
in their wood tracks, wheezed shut.
And the other thing divided, subtracted.

Beyond my mother, in her mother, in a house,
a horse snapped its tail at a blue fly.
The fly spun away, lit the bark of a willow tree.
A leaf dropped, a long leaf stayed.
A narrow canal flowed over stone.

In utero, did she rest?
or did she swing in a warm blood sac
as her mother paced the room,
before white light and black rain were named,
before she would look for *her* mother in the city.

Egg within egg, seed in blind seed,
the child whose name would be
Reiko, the sound of ringing bells.
Now I imagine, as the great wind gusted,
the bronze bell at Otake's shrine

swayed and tolled, and the ringing widened
like waves that a stone hitting water makes—out and out—
traveling, yes, more slowly than light, singing
as far as the melon field and pasture
where the horses didn't burn.

Fragments

My mother would point to his name in a Japanese history book:
Lieutenant-Colonel Naoyuki Kuzume,

her grandfather who fought and lost in New Guinea, 1944.
Who acknowledged his thousands of soldiers gone,

then knelt in the grave he dug, committed *seppuku*,
what his attending soldier later reported:

*I left him alone and walked away
down the hill as I was ordered,*

*the crack of his pistol-shot echoed
through jungle-growth behind me,*

I brought his military cap back home.

-

I've read other accounts, rumors,
Americans captured him, *signs of cannibalism in the Japanese caves*,

he used a sword, not a pistol, a pistol, not a sword.
Aunt Yoko says he sent a last parcel to his wife—

his letter, crossing seas to reach her,
enfolded a coil of his hair and a sliver of fingernail.

*Why nail? I asked, Did it look like a crescent
or the curved accent of a character that spelled "dear wife"?*

No, Yoko said, because nail, like hair, wouldn't spoil.

-

Obaasan saved the fragments
in lidded lacquer darkness,

as if—as in a grave, the body's hair and teeth continue to grow—
his spirit might grow and fill the uniform again,

if she could remember it again, the old house,
the many rooms in Manchuria, all the children in good shoes

and a servant in the kitchen drawing clean water—
until that house was taken. And then another:

*In an air raid she stood under a bridge, chin-deep in riverwater,
saving only the thread of clothing she wore.*

Citizens Corps

In anticipation of another bombing, a volunteer citizens corps was mobilized on August 6 to demolish buildings in Hiroshima. Volunteers, one per household, were asked to bring rope

to tear down walls to clear fire lanes, open firefighting spaces, and create a fire break 100 meters wide running east and west across the center of the city. Obaasan had elected herself to go

so her daughter, two months pregnant with my mother, could rest at home. On a poster announcing the effort, black ink absorbed the heat, so that only letter-shapes were seared through.

Distances

Like rippled rings in a lake,
extending outward
where a rock's been thrown in,

concentric circles on a map
mark distances
from the city's center.

Koi Station, where Obaasan
was ordered off the train
when the drill sounded,

is a dot beside the ring
marked "2.5 kilometers."
But, "Obaasan was about one *ri* away,"

my mother put in a letter
when I told her
what I was writing about.

"One *ri* is 3.9 kilometers."
I did the math.
Had the train station moved?

No, the map's dated 1945.
And she walked *toward* the city
carrying rope in her hand.

At 2.5 kilometers,
wood and black clothing scorched.
The air's fifty times hotter than sunlight

on a clear summer day.
What's the resistance
of a heart? How many miles

will it walk
across a page,
a white field?

Post Script

—I mean, days later, steamed yams
were handed out from a truck.
So hungry, they burned their tongues.

[“And after years, she would hold up her hands”]

And after years, she would hold up her hands
and flutter her fingers to describe what she saw,

pale blue light dropped through the sky,
Kira-kira, she said. Twinkle, twinkle.

Conversation with My Mother

How much fabric was left?

Not much. *Boro-boro*, Obaasan said. Shreds.

And your mother recognized her by the fabric?

Yes.

If the fabric was in shreds, she was practically naked?

No, she wore white cotton undergarments.

And they still covered her body?

They covered her body.

They weren't torn like her blouse and pants?

They covered her body.

What did the pattern of the fabric look like?

I don't remember, but it couldn't have been beautiful.

The emperor forbade decorative dress during the war.

So the pattern wasn't lovely, not mountain peaks, or sparrows on branches?

She might have used the fabric of a finer dress to make work clothes,
like the jacket Higuchi-san made for you.

Was it plain? Was it the fabric's texture, not pattern, that showed on her skin?

No, the fabric was patterned, and the pattern burned into her skin.

Maybe flowers?

Maybe flowers.

Maybe leaves?

Maybe leaves.

Thread

“A scientist in the true sense needs to be in love with a rich store of data.”

—Wallace Chafe

It won't love you back,
not Chapel Hill, a hill,
old dive or bartender
whose turntable changed
your life. Not fields
of silver queen corn raked
by wind, a certain moon or
moonlessness, a bend
in the road, left turn, fork, kiss.
Many kisses. A kitchen,
lemon wedges and salt.
The small dog that darted
into the road. A folded body,
the roommate who carried it
away. Closets full of data,
dates, datelessness shoved
in a shoebox, spare shelf,
sea shell, life-swell, a knot
catches in the throat.
What's lost, reinvented,
windspill, cloudburst, thread-of-milk.
How I knew my way
to the grave I'd never seen.

Self-Interrogation

Sewing needles, a thousand needles, silver needles fused.
Sewing needles or pine needles, what will you do?

All their eyes are melted shut, the eyes that never saw.
What will thread them through?

The little makers are unmade, their days of silk are nights.
What hour to point them to?

Sewing needles, a thousand needles, silver needles fused.
You can stitch a line for needles, but what will you do?

All day people poured into Asano Park

drawn to the green coolness and shelter of leaves.
No one, not even children cried.
No one talked,
that is, very few people cried, or talked.

The figure on the ground was a woman.
Her baby unbuttoned her blouse and drank,
that is, her baby clutched at her
bare breast and drank.

*When I rinsed my handkerchief in the river,
one seam came undone,
that is, the entire cloth
disintegrated in my hands.*

Then My Mother Told Me

“When my mother found Obaasan in a temple, where others lay in rows, she recognized her by a bit of fabric. ‘Mother,’ she said, ‘Is that *you*?’

A monk said that crushed human bone, sprinkled on burns, was healing. He gave them a skull—it was still warm—to wrap in her scarf.

At home, she used a grater, the kind for rubbing ginger-root and garlic, sprinkled rough powder onto the burns. Just as one neighbor believed

in ground potato as a salve—another believed in eating pounds of tomatoes—Obaasan believed that the bone, though painful, had saved her. Years later,

when my sisters and I caught colds, she made us bitter juice, too much radish, no apple to sweeten it. She knew which rhododendrons to pick for a tonic,

leaves that curl tight in winter, the way her hands never closed properly. ‘It was like lightning’ she would say. ‘It must’ve been electricity.’”

Translation

Some things we know: distances between cities, between Otake and Koi,
Koi and Hiroshima, names of stations, the kanji for *atom* includes *child*.

A body lying in the middle of the road, the road,
a scarf, names of lilies, *golden-rayed*, *stargazer*, *demon girl*, *baby deer*.

We know drawings, bicycles, animals on fire, a woman calling
across a rubble field, *Husband forgive me for leaving*,

puppets, buttons, blind fish walking in the hills,
shoes—always shoes—schoolyards, cups of water,

shirtsleeves, umbrella menders, a boy holds a bucket of sand.

Abi kyo kan no chimata Obaasan always said about that day.
There are some things I don't know, so my mother told me,

“*No chimata* means *all around myself*. *Kyo* means *cry*. *Kan* means *cry*.
Abi means *avici*, the eighth and lowest Buddhist hell of hells,

not the light of the lighthouse that still shines on the cape,
not the light of a pyre, silk, mother's eye, or freshly rinsed gauze,

but an iron fortress, an iron rack, a place of iron birds and foxes,
where the fire dog races east to west. There's no time and no space,

it's un-spaced and ceaseless: flaming serpents wrapped around a neck,
sword mountains and sword trees, thorn and razor streams

and only molten iron to drink.”

Notes on the Pacific War, August 1945

Hirohito is a giant yellow-bellied bean hung on a line.

Hirohito is a bucktooth rat with "Nip" branded on his side.

Hirohito is suicide.

Hirohito is volunteer nurses who hide in caves and refuse to wave handkerchiefs.

Hirohito is not Magic Diplomatic Summary.

Hirohito is not Intercept.

Hirohito is not Project.

Hirohito is not Stalin saying *finis Japs*.

Hirohito is not Truman saying *A rain of ruin from the air as the world has never seen*.

Hirohito is a rain of ruin from the air as the world has never seen.

Hirohito, 10,000 Americans injured or dead.

Hirohito, typhoon winds that blew back Genghis Khan are now two-thousand kamikazes cartwheeling down to ships.

Hirohito the curved jewel.

Hirohito circular mirror.

Hirohito is three strongholds, no nine, no thirteen on a southern island.

Hirohito can barely see from his little eyes!

Hirohito is a hairy black spider with radioactive feet!

Hirohito say *sayonara*, say goodbye.

When Hirohito makes a radio address he says *Well things didn't go as planned* and children hear the voice of the sun for the first time.

Hirohito is a country carrying a country on her back like a sack of burnt yams.

Of the Emperor Hirohito, Obaasan always said *Don't look into God's eyes you will go blind*.

During the Reconstruction

My grandmother loved the sound of Americans singing in the streets. But when her daughter fell for one, she wouldn't bless the engagement. Not to that Ohio boy, living with her first-born in a ten-mat room. "David works so hard," my mother wrote, "and there's a view of Fuji. Please come." They eloped: still no word. Then in August, my grandmother got a call from a cousin too distant to bear a grudge: "A girl, six pounds, healthy except for one hip, but it's healing fine. I'm here for a week, then you'll surely come." In October, when willow trees yellowed, she rode the train to visit, and held me—a lopsided thing, in a brace to set the bones straight. She'd only say, "This house is such a mess," but wouldn't cook or clean. A neighbor—my mother would never forget her—cooked dinner and scrubbed the floors. She folded laundry, washed rags in a tub. Pinned to a line against the blue mountain, the row of waving clean white squares only looked like signs of surrender: inside, a family ate without speaking as the little one, who looked like no one's, cried.

The Visit

When three of us visited the hospital
on Halloween weekend,
our friend, lying in his bed,
looked the perfect jack-o-lantern.
Left eye, no right,
a sealed wink where it was.
A white gauze patch
where the mouth was.
In the middle of a sinking face,
as if the bullet cut clean *there* (it didn't),
a reddish, healing circle for a nose.

“A miracle,” he wrote on a spiral notebook.
We nodded. The tube in his throat sighed.
He was making sense,
so when he wrote next
“Now I couldn't get high if I wanted to”
we started to understand
how much of the brain his own aim missed.
He held up fingers to show
how old he turned this birthday, twenty-four.
The gauge of the shotgun, twenty-two.
His hand waved down to his toe.

Colorful cards brightened one wall,
but the curtains were shut tight.
Who found him first,
in what other room?
We saw it coming, friends said.
Saint Francis saw beyond
the body to the soul,
but I couldn't.
The way that, though my dry throat ached,
when we stopped afterward at a fountain,
I couldn't drink.

Some Answers

I don't remember, I was in a blackout.
I don't remember, the city was in a blackout.
I don't like myself very much.
I don't like his wife very much.
We climbed down forty-three flights of stairs.
We walked five miles in paper-thin sandals.
This way to the train station.
This way to the park where trees will hide us from planes.
The signs are confusing in that part of town.
There were x's marked on the eyelids, that's how I knew the people were dead.
Because I prefer whiskey to gin.
Because the cat wasn't close enough to the fire.
Because her ten fingers flamed blue toward heaven.
Because pomegranates, when ripe, split open easily.
Because he was an ordinary white guy.
Because they didn't have any other medicine they used mechurochrome.
That's right, they used vegetable oil.
That's right, he took the last rice ball.
He turned the key.
He didn't mean to.
The tomatoes didn't help at all.
Because silk was rare.
Because the priest liked a drink.
Because the hospital was gone.
Like the clouds of ten storms gathering on the horizon.
I only thought I was in love.
The scar on her cheek, reddish-purple, continued to weep.
He told a different version of the story.
It never belonged to him anyway.
The sound of airplanes scares her now.
She has difficulty expressing her feelings.
You should be tender.
You should probably leave now.
You should look closer.
The first step is admitting defeat: the prayer goes like this.

Notes on My First Visit to Kochi, Japan

On my way to the bath this morning
I saw a yellow snake
as thick as my wrist

draped in the plum tree.
Aunt Yoko said, don't worry,
he comes around now and then.

Like Mama warned me
the bath is still outside
across from the outhouse

because Yoko doesn't like change:
the same deep tiled tub,
the same hinged drawcover to pull back,

the same shallow wooden bucket
that rinsed someone's skin,
someone's sore healing wounds—

a woman's body like mine,
no, not like mine at all—
maybe both, like a rhyme.

II

Yam

Blind mole, her potato body
shaped like my body,
calls me callous.

I am what I am, mama
of whiskery root, small-eyed,
pucker-mouthed.

But a little heat will
soften the meat. I am golden.
I am a yam.

My pale sister is *yamaimo*.
From Japanese mountains
she's taken raw,

snowfall in a blue clay bowl.
But elsewhere, of flat fields
that men sow,

I am the bubble under a rib
if taken cold, the acidic singe
of fresh flesh.

Clean

The way she says at the group session,
I'm hungry but I'm broke, more like *hongry*
so even the vowel in the center
is hungrier, more hollow.
Says, she's been drinking all along,
drinking today, her two daughters
waiting now in her car
so afterward you drive them all
to where the girls live with their grandma,
the younger with yellow barrettes asking,
"Why are *you* driving?"
You turn onto a leafy street,
you know she knows
with a wordlessness
that might nudge her years from now:
I-remember-one-night-when...
and you hope for once
that your voice is forgettable,
the surprisingly calm, adult voice
counting down street numbers, saying,
"Is this your house, girls? Is this?"

In the Church Basement

the meeting-room walls are cold concrete
blocks painted sea-foam green, bargain color
of hospitals, institutions, scabbed and chipped.
Near the low ceiling, small barred windows
filmy outside with dirt and soot, inside with smoke,
frame what passes on the sidewalk above us:
sneakers, stilettos, boots, prim velvet flats,
buggies, bikes, dogs, bum's cart, bigwheel,
going to or from the avenue where the shops
and cafes are, bars I don't enter anymore.
Where I know which barkeep gives
a heavy pour, which barback winks back,
which patrons, my ex-monk, my boozy boys
will make my own bad habits look good.
From down here, those passersby I glimpse
knee-down, caught in blurred passage
between destinations I want to call ordinary—
play-date, bakery, drycleaning to pick up—
I envy them. The "normies," "civilians"
for whom I once felt *sorry*, god!
for missing afterhours, sunrise-tinged nights.

J. D.

Amber light-infused elixir glassbottled in a neat black box,
I'd know you anywhere, the deep luster of your package,
read you blind like you're braille. I've passed you up twice, ten times
now in my friend's kitchen, on my way to the fridge or sink.
Oh, sometimes I *think* I'm still in love with you, your sour heat,
my lip beading with sweat on the L train—the car couldn't brake
close enough to the platform exit, though I gauged my place
to the foot. The stairwell leading up to the too-bright-light of streets
in darkness I blinked back when I opened the tavern door....

Cannoli

Getting over you
is like stepping on a cannoli
on Orchard street, where I'm walking

to the corner cafe to read
about Rilke's angels and the infinite.
I'd like to eat the infinite,

suck it down like the sweet cream
stuck to my boot heel.
Would it fill me up?

Who's the pastry shell here,
you or me? —look
at the sun, so full of herself

up by Saint Mary's steeple:
she needs nothing, has no need.
Pigeons purr, lined on a wire

like semicolons: I'm happy;
I'm sad; if leaving you
leaves me hollow

I'll eat the word *hollow*,
let the city's pavement
eat my shoe until

all the sugar's off.

Perspective From Primrose Hill

Did a spark on St. Paul's roof
look like a crashed star,

or like the flare of a match
touched to paper?

When fire watchers spider-walked
across the pillowed dome

to collect fallen bombs—
how did a body not trip?

The travelers and businessmen,
the birds on the cathedral steps

have long disappeared now
as I climb the heath's green

Primrose Hill above
squared London

where one round form rises,
gathering skies to her skirt

like a mother calls her children
in from dusk's fire, and I follow.

III.

The night that the lights
of the whole Northeast
 blacked out
I could finally see:
the darkness showed
 me what to do.

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The Groundhog

—how some names are stories,
how, if you've never seen a groundhog,
you can know *ground* and *hog*,
then find what's missing

in the hairy animal sitting upright,
sniffing air in a neighbor's yard.
A Norwegian friend once told me
in her language, the word for *goatee*

translates to *porn donut*. I wonder
whatever happened to my friend
or to that East Village bar?
She dated a boy without a goatee,

without, for that matter, a donut.
A bare branch scrapes the window,
winter's coming and I'm thinking
how my own name means

fourth month and *naive self* and *hell*.
Born in August, what kind of story's that?
My father's name was David
for *beloved*—beloved, hell, this story

is right. Every morning, I'm looking
for the groundhog, for the piggish,
brown ripple across a yard, the dash
under a porch into the forgiving dark.

That New Year's Eve

You crunched our good car into a telephone pole.
Drunk. Did you mean to teach me?
The roads were snow-drifted, the black ice hidden.
With their siren flashing but silent, two cops
dropped you home. I heard Mama saying your name
with a question mark as you walked in.
You punched the door—hollow plywood caving easily—
that opened from the front room to your basement office.
A hole we cover with a Christmas wreath year round.

Weather

Fortunately, it's just a box of cereal
he throws, and it misses my head.
Then the shoehorn whizzes by.

Another touch-and-go morning when
a hangover clouds his aim.
Valium helps but slows the arm.

Chew quietly, I think to myself, *Drink your tea.*
No contact, just the weather,
calm or hail raining.

Winter Recess

He takes me to see Lake Erie frozen,
the heaped-up shore the waves have sculpted,
white tundra and half-circle of horizon beyond—
the stillness feels dense, church-hushed.
School's out, and he's still job hunting
meaning Jimmy Carter's in office,
meaning a parent to myself these days.
We hike across the ice,
kicking clumps that break open, exposing
tiny piped rows of pale-green.
One frozen crest splashes water,
glossing layer on layer, making itself.
It's safe, he says, though I wonder
at the rest of the lake beneath our feet,
where grease ice and slush
must heave like breath,
with the weight of centuries
of changing shapes and names:
Lake Maumee, Arkona, Whittsley, Wayne.
I've learned them in school,
how Erie won't last long in geological time,
the clay cliffs where swallows nest are slipping.
Months before the electric company
will hire him, I think he hopes
I'll know more forms of water than of worry—
another kick at the ice,
Tomorrow, he says, *we'll bring your sled.*

Ten Houses

Where my mom lives now is the tenth,
but before that, before I turned nine,
nine times my dad moved us.
First the tiny Tokyo house, then
the apartment at Yokosuka Navy Base.
Then a nice house there too.
When I was six, we left Japan for Oregon,
lived in a motel for two months.
We moved into a rental, but it stank
of pet-snake droppings. So another rental.
It was haunted—he saw the owner inside
the night after the owner had died.
We moved into another apartment after that.
He started his own business. Then
the business sank, St. Helens blew.
We drove cross-country in a hatchback
to fill up his parents' house on Lake Erie.
We counted food stamps, he looked
for work. When an electric company
hired him, we moved into a small cabin
on the water, meant only for summers.
It was always sandy, or snowed.

The Leaf Book

In the fall of third grade, when my teacher
assigns the leaf book project—I have to collect
and name the leaves of all kinds of trees—
my dad drives our whole family to an arboretum,
brings a field guide so we're all leaf-picking,
all saying *gingko, chestnut, walnut, buckeye*.
My mother writes down American names,
learns too that rootbeer-scented sassafras bear
three kinds of leaves, mittens, gloves, and palms.

The night before my book's due, he stays up.
He helps sort leaf after leaf, ironing them
between waxpaper pages that he's cut.
By the focused light of the desk lamp he seems
to grow younger, while I grow older,
typing labels, tracing a diagram of light synthesis.
Does he know that my teacher will hold up
my book for the class to see, that I'm looked at
enough, the one mixed kid? That they'll stare

like they stared the day I was called from class
to be interviewed for the advanced program.
I got up from my chair, carrying the too-big,
man's leather briefcase he'd loaned to me
for luck. But like the kids' snickers, it dismayed
and flustered me, the way the questions did:
Can you name three things made of aluminum?
How tall is the average man? I answered
with all I knew, my own height, *Four feet tall....*

When he heard the news, he called
my principal, "Your test is wrong," he said,
"This is your regional spelling champ,
honor roll student, first chair in band."
He listed bell choir, softball, swim team,
the states and countries I'd seen. But I knew
I had to try harder, I had five kinds of love:
scarlet oak, white oak, black oak, laurel and pin,
memorized by size and color, lobe and vein.

Between Morning Prayers

“I Don’t Have Hands that Caress my Face”

—Mario Giacomelli, *photograph, Young Priests Series 1962-63*

Today, on winter’s first snowfall,
it’s no coincidence
that the young seminarians
in bell-shaped robes
appear as heavy as
the trees behind them,
brother and trunk falling
black against the sharp white yard.
Think of the darkness of a life without
hands that caress your face,
hands like branches
reaching without touch;
think of sleep, the body
inside the hollow body of nights.
Only snow will kiss this
figure in the center
of the camera’s eye, the boy
with arms flung open wide
to embrace air,
and because his face
is loveliest, because like Adam
he offers a rib to make a space
for God, you want to be like that, that good.

Smoke

The sweet spiced scent of Marlboro Reds,
the carton under his driver's seat: as a kid
I loved each new pack's gold ribbon to tug,
the crinkle and crisp of the cellophane wrap.
How the lid flipped open, the foil
peeled back, peppered with tobacco flecks
to catch under a nail. Three snug rows
of filters, ripe stalks in a field. I learned
how to turn the box upside-down, bang
on my left palm to tap the stems tight.
With one hand, I light a match in its book,
pinch my smoke between my pointer finger
and thumb. Each practiced gesture, each drag
to hot ash, an echo. And I feel sick.

Montana

We're in Montana, at another motel
when he grows fevered, speaking
tongues under a stiff, starched sheet.
Mama says to get out of the pool,
an ambulance is coming, but I won't:
I want the cool water that's blue
where the floor's painted blue,
I want to play pearl-diver, dolphin, fish.
He's just tired, driving days
in the summer heat since Portland
with no one else to drive—
though we did rest two nights
in the national park where
he showed us our first elk
and a herd of bearded bison,
clockwork geysers, wildflower fields.
The vacation he's made of our fleeing,
sunned naps and card games, this swim
under snowcapped heartbeat peaks.

Floating Forest

when Mount St. Helens thunders and gray flakes confetti the picnic table
when you scrape a handful into a glass jar as a souvenir
when the stores sell out of brooms and shovels
when lava-rivers push houses and a coal crust glows
when the dome goes quiet again
when it wakes up again and hoof-prints track the page of a hill
when a photographer crouches in the nose of a small plane
when a doe folds like a note
when a paper deer
when the soft whites of
when fallen at the height of
when you're moving away again and don't know why
when as a child you were always running
when that summer the wild, wide blue of glacier lakes filled with ashes and woods

We Make It Through (Letter to Myself)

I wish I was with you when you got the news

when your dad's coworker called the college switchboard
and tracked down somebody to find you in the cafeteria
your dad's sick a brain aneurysm go home

I'm helping you pack a suitcase
and when you don't want your black formal dress
(no funerals you said) I'm leaving it out

and later when your mind goes
when you can't recognize your apartment or anything one afternoon
not your dog asleep under your hand

I could tell you we make it through

One More Hour Maybe

After the first surgery
he'd improved, but today he's worse.
We eat lunch in the cafeteria. We ride
an elevator up. The doctor says,
It's time. One more hour maybe.
Or with his heart—it's gone this long—two.

Shoes

Maybe the body's inert position
after two weeks in bed
is making his feet pronate inward—
atrophy (he's shrinking) and we worry
he'll go permanently pigeon-toed.
The doctor says we might buy high-tops
to brace the ankles.

Who drove to the shoe store?

My sister and I each lace up a foot,
the new white sneakers absurdly sturdy,
almost too dense and gravitated
beside the wilted gown,
but it's something better to do.

Suited

When the funeral director tells us
to bring a suit, what can we do
but, later that evening, stand
before his side of the closet,
wondering brown or pinstriped,
navy or gray wool, which
tie and socks, which shoes?
And when someone handles
the furry, cows' head slippers
I'd given him that Christmas,
an old joke between us,
it's as if his sensibility
passes into our hands
to choose and finish the task,
so at the viewing
mourners see the made-up face,
dark suit buttoned properly up,
we see a pair of feet
warmed by cartoon slippers
under the half-closed pine lid.

A Beaver

What I remember most afterward is his skin,
not just bloodless gray, grayish tinged yellow
from somewhere far beneath,
like the skin of the animal I've seen lately
floating belly-up in a creek.

A beaver, I think, but the face is hidden,
head tilted back too far to be sure.

A slight mound of torso pokes through
the surface: mashed fur shows the nipples,
perfect ridges of rib, like a tiny man's—

and like a car-wreck victim that's stuck,
he seems to beg me to turn away
but *he* won't go; the cold, still water
scummed with night's ice preserves him,
my mummy, my memory, waiting for me
to pause on the mud bank. Mornings,
at first sight, I know the gray, drifted shape
isn't wood or stone: recognition thuds
down through me as the name rises
to my tongue.

Another Hair Poem

In the first poem, I made a kite with it,
flew it into the sky.

In the second poem, it talked,
I told it to shut up.

In the third poem it talked again!
And I listened to his blond hair

in a baggie on my closet shelf—
it wanted to know why

a nurse gave it to me
with the clothes and a black comb.

Not Robert-Redford hair,
not prom- or catch-you-later-hair,

but heavy, a little meaty
to the touch.

Maybe I should stuff a voodoo doll with it.
Or give it to birds

to coil in their nests.
What if I threw it like ashes into water?

Ate it like bread
and got fat?

Think I'll put it on my head, dance a two-step.
Think I'll forgive us both

for this long separation—
ten years since I've visited his grave—

maybe then my poem will be done.

Devil's Lake

Then another corner of the house goes blank,
this one where four fishing rods had leaned,
two tall poles, my short, kid's pole
with a close-faced reel. My younger sister's,
just a tree branch he'd stripped down,
rigged with a line and hook, a small bobber
she knew to look for to dip,
though fish only swam away
from our loud dock, our din of footsteps and shouts,
sunfish and perch darting through
the lake-shallow greens, yellow water lilies,
water celery. Pondweed that grows
rootless, suspended—a memory
of itself—a flicker of scales vanishing in the leaves.

The Innkeeper

My last morning in London, over breakfast,
he's telling me more about his daughter
who'd died of cancer ten years ago—
even at our first breakfast, he and his wife
had threaded her name through our talk,
their hands and bodies still for politeness,
their words' weight making them. Her absence
welled up like atmosphere through the house-
turned-guest-house, a dampness or chill,
vague scent of cedar tucked in a drawer.
Had they read knowledge of loss on my face,
felt invited to confide? Or did they talk of her
to every guest, diminish grief by repetition?
She would've been my age—my late father, his.

He pours more coffee into our cups, saying,
“After she died, two coincidences told me
of another world, spirits I guess. I oversaw
the programs for the funeral—it was gorgeous,
I made sure—and searched every shop in the city
for the right paper. When I finally found it,
a soft cream, the finest brand, the printer gave it
for free. Imagine that! The paper was discontinued,
he said, the odd ream a burden. That evening,
I got a call about the flat that my daughter,
from her bed, had convinced me to buy.
They said that she'd paid an advance—”
He presses his palms to his eyes.
“Every day, a sign. I think she sent you here.”

I nod, remembering arriving late at night,
exhausted, my suitcase lost. He knew my name,
promised directions to shops, showed my room
where tea and blankets drove out the cold.
The next day, he and his wife invited me
to the heath, where she chose to rest
by a lake, preferring, like my mother,
a view of ducks and geese. He and I walked,
past hedgerows and swimming ponds, past
trees and tree-roots gnarled into human shapes,

like forms half-seen in clouds. “These woods and trails,”
he said “untouched for years,” looking as pleased
as if he’d made them, pleased with my listening.

At the breakfast table now, drinking what’s left
of my coffee, sugar at the bottom of a cup,
I say, “The morning of our last Christmas,
sixteen years ago, I dreamed so clearly that he died,
I woke up, I went to my parents’ room.
Of course the covers were warm, but I tapped him
awake to be sure. Two weeks later—
it was sudden. An aneurysm. They really tried.”
As I look at him, the window behind him illuminated
with the pale gray light of early spring, of rain
that might, at any moment, streak the old,
slightly warped panes of his home’s original glass,
I know my longing’s the same longing as his
or anyone’s, here or there, so yes, there’s a *there*.

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After the Comet Hyakutake

(*hyakutake: one hundred bamboos*)

Take off your work shoes

and let's go there, Mother,
to the island of one hundred bamboos,
of one hundred wood hollows sipping the sun.

Let's turn gold in the day-long light
and write your name, *Kuzume*,
ninety times in the sand with our toes.

Let's catch flashing blueback salmon
with a line of eighty thoughts, weave
a net of seventy sorrows for our keep.

With the youngest tree make a flute.
With the oldest, a lookout to sight stars
sailing their bright paper ferries.

Sixty to beat back a fire,
fifty to pierce unwelcome ghosts.
We'll paint ourselves blue and green

and be the day's twentieth wave of the ocean.
We'll paint ourselves like air between two trees
and be the busied wings of a bird

where the tidewater's never too deep,
where the shore draws near if you wade out,
and like a cricket that sings its brief season

in a rare grove for a longer season we'll sing.