


Spring 2020

Two hemispheres of light

Teresa Vanairsdale

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TWO HEMISPHERES OF LIGHT

A Thesis

Presented To

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Cheney, Washington

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for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

By

Teresa Vanairsdale

Spring 2020

THESIS OF TERESA VANAIRSDALE APPROVED BY

CHRISTOPHER HOWELL, GRADUATE STUDY COMMITTEE

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GEOGRAPHIES

LAKE COTTAGE: AGE EIGHT

The cabin was large, lots of bedrooms
with windows opening onto the lake, fringe of sand,
indigo water, and endless days for
 sailing, swimming, peanut

butter sandwiches on the beach
and waterskiing when father arrived early
at the cabin on good weekends.

 On bad weekends, he would not

get home till after dark, the cabin
quiet, shades pulled, baby asleep,
kids dreaming of water, their breath
 even, until commotion

in the hallway, the eight-
year-old pads barefoot into
the dark hall where
 her father's naked shape

drips lake water
while upset mother tries to guide
him quickly to the bedroom as he teeters
 and wobbles like Eddie who is two.

Mother told Caroline
to go back to bed
and she walked to her room
 looking back over her

shoulder like she forgot something,
her parent's bedroom illuminating
father's strange frightening shape,
 freezing the frame like a picture she would always remember.

COYOTE TRAIL

In morning's newness we hike Coyote Trail, so named
for the prolific coyote scat all along its length.

We walk almost due north for two or three miles
through boggy meadows dotted with clots of snow

still hanging on in the shade in spite of May's heat.
Thin clouds dot the sky, moving glacially eastward.

Baby bear grass now forms the snowy
heads of August, yellow skunk cabbage clots

the wet bogs with lime green shoots
on waxy, just sprouted dark leaves.

Taking its familiar sweet time, the trail plunges
down a steep pitch to intersect with Caribou Creek.

We won't be wading across today
through the frenzy of runoff,

have come only to touch the drama of flood
stage. In last summer's slack water

we kayaked far up the creek avoiding difficult
portages; high water of the previous spring

having scoured Caribou of woodsy detritus,
made clean sailing up the waterway.

Today, the creek is a giant sweating silver
horse, galloping in its twists and turns,

washing log jams into the waiting
eddies, flotsam and jetsam of the forest.

There is no way to know
what may befall. It is flood

season. Calamity lurks in the eddies
and the windblown trees.

POEM TO ETHERIDGE KNIGHT

Sitting in anemic late afternoon light,
I read Etheridge Knight in view of water,
surrounding snowy peaks in various stages of melt,
larch, birch and honeysuckle just starting.

Nobody here but us and the animals outside the door
doing what they do, their rituals oddly similar to ours,
traipsing down the mountain in the evening
for a drink, taking their fill of the lake
before retiring to tree wells, evening hours
dreamless and wary; they are hardwired for this.

On the road in late fall we see elk scat, moose nuggets,
coyote, rabbit, bobcat and deer. In summer
and early fall when huckleberries are on, we find
dark purple scat of black and grizzly bear.

The sun is watery now, thin and reaching for
the western mountains, beyond which the sky darkens
to a bruise as does Etheridge's level gaze.
Do you see me here reading your book? I thought so.

GARY SNYDER POEM

In the rosy morning, I start the truck,
drive up toward huckleberries
in the mountains, ducking down one
side of the ruts and up the other.

An hour of this chop
almost lulls me to sleep, I climb
beyond the thick tree line
up into sky.

Looking down
at the Narrows, Priest Lake's
slender waistline, farther north
the scrawny finger of Priest River

forming the Thorofare thread
to the Upper Lake, two or three
miles looking like
an inch-and-a-half from here.

I park on a steep, rocky spot, set the brake,
bucket and bear spray
hitched to my belt,
I wade into the prolific berries.

Where to start, choose a loaded bush,
talking to myself in a British accent
as usual – better to do this alone,
I think.

Pillaging bushes, below
limbs of evergreens where moisture
makes bigger berries, reaching,
reaching. Nothing I won't do

for a huckleberry, even pick
during a thunderstorm, won't leave
till my one-gallon margarita
bucket is full.

I start down the game
trail to the pick-up, singing
Don't Fence Me In. Rest a little
under the waiting bull pines

fully knowing how lucky I am.

Fish keys out of my jeans,
start the truck, head down
the old, rutted logging road, shifting
a little under a pretense
that life will go on and on
like this rutted road.

BEFORE THE LUPINE BLOOMS

I

violet, we will be gone,
and things will go on
as if we'd never been
the loons return to the bay,
their silver songs
of dreams
before the red flash
of Indian Paintbrush,
the ditches
and summer's heat
beats to sweat's ancient
cellular longing.

II

Everything slows, the hour hand
pauses in thick silence
before boiling
August, forecast dry
and nervous. As water mirrors
the fuming sky's abrasion
of green and midnight.

III

Fall has come golden
again to the tamarack
while stands
of old bull pine witness
the migrations of geese,
the stars, the sand,
the solemn eye of the loon
will go on for eons
but you and I, with our simple
gesture before the lupine
blooms violet, will be gone.

WALL

Gap-toothed sections of border wall
impose themselves on the desertscape

like a schoolyard bully.
impeding the San Pedro

River, standing its ignorant ground,
damming the river with debris,

fouling otherwise healthy,
free flowing water.

The barrier of it confuses migrating
animals, prevents passage in the wild

habitat where food
or water or mates are abundant.

Its foundations poured deep
to stabilize its weight,

destabilize the vast
aquifer below.

WHEN SUMMER CAME TO THE DESERT

It flowed over us,
birds or water, the warmth
behind bitter cold, it came
like a sidewinder slithering
silently, a wave of heat.
Only yesterday
brittle bush wept
and shivered
while Sacred Datura
burrowed into the earth
promising to return
in a brief blast
of white blazing glory.

Rocks accumulate sun's heat
in a hurry. Cleavage planes
reveal the mineral composition
of rock. Are we like that?
Do places where we break
reveal what we're made of,
the angles of our suffering,
magmas, all kinds of pain, flowing
from the center of us?

DESERT SUN AND DESERT MOON

In the context of desert, small
things matter, hummingbirds darting
between the blooming Palo Verde
and silver-thorn acacia,
tiny Verdin's yellow heads
searching the saguaro
spines for insects.

Not the bloated opinion of the sun,
whose ritual cracks open the blinding
dawn, filling canyons with insight,
later beating an unwilling retreat
into dusk, while the frame freezes
in the west for an instant, then a white
moon in the husk of twilight
against the darker plate of sky
ladling silver light
from east to west.

NO STARS

I walk outside to look at the sky;
no stars, their absence fills
the canyons, Bear, Sabino,
Rattlesnake, Breakfast.

As I look up, a physical
hermeneutics of loss
of this missing light,

Blazing Star flowers heat
the desert floor today, geometric
as spokes on a wheel.

All shapes are blunted
by distance
like so much else

in the ancient saguaro spine's
blood pouring out.
Take us, spines,
hollow bird bones.

SUNRISE AT SUICIDE POINT

In early mornings on Mackinac Island
 our habit
 if the day
 is clear, is to rise at six,
 wear layers for early morning
 October cold, and hike
 up to Suicide Point far above
 Lake Huron,
 where we dare to lean out onto a shelf
 of unstable limestone to watch
 sunrise unfold
 in a rainbow of peach,
 gold, and orange. Maple
 and aspen leaves lift lightly
 on a thermal-driven breeze
 as if they know what's next.

We stride through Victorian neighborhoods, East
 and West Bluffs, with their sprawling,
 ancient summer
 homes – homes whose names
 were those of meatpackers
 and railroad magnates
 from Chicago, politicians, industrialists,
 wives and children.
 We pad reverently
 on a mossy path through the waking
 woods, trees rubbing their eyes
 in the pre-dawn gray.
 When we, breathless, finally reach
 the fenced shelf, the sun has still
 not come up for air, is a
 gold nugget swimming at the edge
 of the sea, its watery birth
 a birth like ours, concentrated,
 everything suddenly bathed
 in shafts of ochre light.

AFTER

the lupine bloomed
 and after maps were pored over,
 and after you asked about building a screen porch
 onto your cabin to discourage the mosquitoes.

After the change in our separate lives
 and after a return to some normalcy like rain,
 after people moved around us like galaxies,
 arranging themselves at various angles to the center,

and after you said you needed to drive to the Arctic
 to think about us, and I saw the same moon
 over Idaho that you beheld over the Mackenzie River
 3000 miles away

and after you came home
 and I said *what did you think?*
 and you said *about what?* After I weeded
 your gardens for weeks, not one dandelion

left standing, roots dug up after my reign
 of terror, and the strawberries,
 lettuce, and lavender moldered in the yard,
 after heat and storms and plots,

after the posturing and negotiating
 and after the future was postulated,
 after ethics and ideas and forests
 were scrutinized for trees but only

after we decided this conclusion
 would have to be a lightning
 strike after clouds gathered into their
 distinctive growl and after that, the rain

and we, flying to Mackinac Island in the sun
 after the clouds lifted, after the way forward
 hummed in the air like bees and we glittered
 like white stones on the coast of Lake Huron.

MIDDLE DISTANCE

First the distance between
the right-angled tilted mountains
and the grassy foreground
collided as I drove down the road,
earth's history laid out before
me in bold relief while
my poem picked
up speed and flew.

LADY ON THE FERRY FROM HARRIS TO SKYE

Everything about her is thin – her hair
a rough fuzz, rounds of chemo,
I think. You would know the look.
Her jeans size two and she's too tall
for those legs. Will they hold her up?
You don't know.

Wasted fingers and face,
kindness in her eyes as they sweep
over me,
hands lightly lifting
from pockets in acknowledgement
of my gaze.

Her nose is lean,
weightless, ending in a beak.
Her purse, a thin flap
of fabric hung loose, her only definite
line, concave, vague shoulders.
Her husband is thin too, his teeth
long, wan lips conceal
their drawn out trial.

HIGHLAND CATHEDRAL (national song by the Royal Scots Dragoon Guards)

Coming down out of the mountains,
we reach the sea, driving
in the altered state
of the Scottish Highlands.

The land waves like a flag, its mists
climb to the tops of one thousand
meter peaks and sheep graze inside
the fog, their dense wool shielding
them from downdrafts
while beside the cliffs, sea birds
bank on small patches of sun
above a speckled ocean.

Highland Cathedral belts
into our rental car
from the CD player as if
washing clean our sins
in the mists. Castles
and fiords, stone cottages
and ancient rock fences.

We race down one-lane
macadam to the sea
ranging south and west,
spy a huge golden eagle
gliding in search
of prey on the moors.

HIGHLANDS

Three aging white horses,
apparitions in a field,
manes flapping like tired pages,
they run before a ruined house
on the bleak northwestern coast
of Scotland. Sandstone walls
blood-red by weather
near old paths by the sea.

And the sea always, come
the tides, mortal sadness lapping
at remains of crofts and clearings
far up beaches
where heather begins
and braided foundations linger,
like the hard years of bare subsistence.
I hear their lives
in the wind.

CELESTIAL

SHE PRAYS HER FLOWERS LIKE A ROSARY

Watch as she works to discover
the weed with its foul demeanor,
guileful among the guiltless.
Dislodging the root, without
disturbing the flower, she sighs
and sings to the terrible
certainty of wrong, her praise
rising away from it
like birds to the heavens.

She pauses over each plant, then on
to the next, telling them like beads.
See, her plot a supplication,
a gesture to the God of foxglove,
cosmos, tulips, and phlox.
For a gracious hour, much
is forgiven
and much the ruthless grave has lost.
For how can she kneel and not
absorb the purity that stains each petal?
Her light body brightens
over the resurrection
of her faithful perennials.

Her knees soiled
by her holy crawl
to the garden altar
hardly absolves
the guilt she supposes
on her hands. She begs
grace for her heart,
wind for the green sails.

ONE HOLY, CATHOLIC CHURCH

In the name of the Father,
 please make mine a double,
 and of the Son, who drowned every
 dusk with whiskey,
 and of the Holy Spirit,
 who quietly watched the wreckage.

Holy Mary, mother of God,
 with three Delta flight attendants
 dancing the Charleston on the altar
 at my mother's funeral last year,
 wearing nothing but sackcloth and ashes.

*Take out the trash, mother said,
 empty the dishwasher
 for the forgiveness of sins,
 as they say, and you'll
 be rewarded for things done in secret.*

*This is my body, given up for you, Jesus said,
 wear it gently and do no harm.
 Blood and wine, bread and flesh;
 these must be consumed
 regularly with gratitude.*

For the sake of April tulips,
 you too must be born again,
 not of water, but of the spirit,
 so to speak, then you can give
 life another shot.

We all have scraps of faith
 almost believed, a fusion of recipes
 waiting to be made, lived,
 but we also hold our unbelief
 as a flag, a proud unknowing

*that hope is the thing with feathers, Emily
 said once, and more – that it perches
 in the soul and sings the tune without
 words, and never stops at all.
 Bless her heart, as North Carolinians say.*

The life of the flesh is in the blood

and if it runs out for some
reason, we are bloody screwed,
Halleluiah! Amen.

JESUS GOES TO THE MINORS

We believe in Jesus!

The Mariners drop-kicked Jesus to the minors today.
For now, he'll be playing in Tacoma, a rump-sprung
city on the verge of Seattle. Anyone can see
this scenario would be dispiriting, especially
since he was a Yankee darling only a year or so back.
Lately, not so much. Adding to his problems,
Jesus also was handed a fifty game suspension
for using performance-enhancing drugs,
like so many of his haloed, star-studded peers.
Hard to believe a catcher with heaven-sent
abilities at hitting would slip into such a slump.
A torn meniscus completes his woes
so he can't play for six weeks anyway.
One can imagine the black cloud above
his new digs and team on the other side of the tracks.
Not playing baseball and living in Tacoma, two facts
Jesus must wrap his head around each day.
And the headlines say it all -- *Jesus Disappoints*.

JESUS IN A BAR

Once I saw Jesus in a bar in Canada, far up
the northwest coast of British Columbia, near
the Alaska border. I heard his footsteps before
I saw his face forming in the foam of my beer,

like the Midwest Madonna face in a slice of pizza
or the Mary, Queen of Peace statue living
in a mushroom cloud. We are just trying, I think,
to attach some semblance of the divine

to the rot of our lives, however feebly, we sink
into prevarication and the desire for miracles
when our social order becomes disorder
and when our attempts at civility cry

for a new world.

SUPPLICATION

God, I am very annoyed today
by the many stressful situations

in my life. It is mostly
school deadlines and medical

appointment stress. I am also
a little annoyed with you which

I hate to say,
remember how many times

I asked you to restore
my relationship with Darla,

or help me to know how
to accomplish it? I know

you are busy, but
what the hell? I must have

asked a hundred times
like that holy woman in the Bible,

I knocked and knocked;
I waited years for your help,

for a bit of advice,
a sign in the clouds, or

a piece of pizza with Darla
spelled in the melting cheese.

TROPIC OF CAPRICORN

THINKING THAT A GIRL COULD ACTUALLY BLOOM

I was fifteen and my head
was in bloom. Every white
day, I swam across summer,
the beginnings of lust
budding just under
my chin like dandelion
butter.

In those days, I sewed
a blue dress of materials
bought at the dime
store. A low-cut neckline
and my tanned chest cost
more than planned.

When I awoke from summer,
smoke rose above the ruins:
my beautiful hands
beaten into fists,
my dress
torn into fragments
of a hard, blue truth, ruins.

At the unwed mothers
home, my own
mother left me watching
her car wind away
and no one cried. Nuns announced
that I would never go home
again, and, in fact, I have not
felt at home anywhere since.

MAKING TIME

We had an idea of sex
but no particulars,
no clear directives
like solving long division
or its mirror multiplication.

The Scarlet Letter
offered salacious rumors,
hints of guilt,
but no full-on
consummation.
Did anyone
really do all that
on their wedding night
under some other moon?

Our lemon slice of moon,
snow on February
ground
as sex slicks
up the windshield
with whatever heat
is in the car
and bitter cold outside.

Will the tentative
throbbing silence hold
all the way or is
the shrill terror
of naiveté enough,
or should she
run home now
before the setting moon?

A HISTORY OF US

I felt it in the throb of your heart,
the rhythm and heat of you
spiraling toward the moon,
spinning back,
I knew to your marrow
every carnal cell of you
their specific geography
the proverb
of your soul
every rock and sand grain
was ours, every golden leaf and change

seasons turned
over by degrees but we were bound
by nature and the stars
to our own slow progression
and
I knew you
like I know that wind
from
the south
or in the evening from the north.
Do you remember the nights
I surrendered speechless and naked
how we swam
together in currents
of our history.

ED

– after Emily Dickinson

To love would be the greatest thing –
That I could ever give –
A song of love that I could sing –
A song of love to live.

And when I think of you, my love –
I scarce can hold it in –
The lightest feather from above –
Brushes lips and chin.

My dearest darling I will write –
But not of this to you –
My heart so full, so dense, so bright –
Can't risk a love so true.

ACCRETION

I.

After the first transgression
she did not want to wear pretty
clothes. After the second,
she knew something
of the nature of accretion

II.

In the evenings, she saw a golden
square of window next door
and moved toward that light
as a form of avoidance

III.

On a warm May evening, the moon
surfaced above the seething houses
saying *hello, hello – I am faithful
again to the sky*, as a boy and girl
went silently into the night.

HANGING THE WASH

I lift a shirt from the mound of wet
laundry, for a second remembering
how soft flannel caresses
the small of the back, and how happy
you were to find it at St. Anthony's
rummage sale.

Next, I shake out the wrinkles
from the stained jeans you wear
in spite of my dissent
and fold them over the line
as if your thighs could bend like that.
I observe the slender waist
band circling like my own arm
when we walk down a road.
Now a blue towel, which
this morning touched every inch
of you, drinking water
like nectar from your excellent
parts. I raise the old t-shirt
from the Tigers fantasy camp,
pin it like a flag to the line.

This is only laundry.
What will I do when your clothes
are gone, when chairs and the clothesline
will be empty of us?
How do the dead console
each other?
he loves me; he loves me not,
picking petals one by one?

STILL LIFE WITH CHEVY

We will I think;
let the bedclothes lie unmade while

the morning's tendrils unfold the warmth
we left resting in the sheets,

as though we nestle there still,
pillows imprinted with the shapes of our heads,

and when the sun creeps over the windowsill
and falls down the length of another

morning and another noon another dusk
and still the blankets

folding the scent of us inside we will realize
this is about time and its absence,

our parting driving away in the Chevy station wagon
into the mid-sixties with no seat belts

to the life we imagined looking for arrowheads
on the banks of the Pend Oreille,

where death cannot hover when our limbs will
stay ever entangled our lives giving nothing away.

YESTERDAY, THE SUFFERING

She shrugs off her expectations like a blouse,
tossing them into the corner with the dust,
baring her back to the deep spreading bruise
that might begin just under the skin, willing herself
to remain naked to the gathering storms outside
her window, a crescendo of notes, a temptation
unmoved by the drama of *what if*.

As in a newborn, every hope is wound
up in the small fist of heart, one beat after
another. He will learn to expect the warmth
of the breast, his lips encircle life
and extract it; he will learn to demand
dry clothing, warmth, community,
and later, shrug off expectations as blips

of hope in a watery world, but to earn
understanding by suffering is a mercy.
There is no other
mentor, no other lover
to help him shed his clothes and wear his
nakedness in the world.

1. BEFORE THE FALL

Energy like solar flare
you and me flitting
everywhere eating
the world, the cottage
of our being sweet
and warm whenever and wherever
we roamed,
ourselves durable
with ample passions.

2. AFTER THE FALL

Light went out of the world
and need held
all things for ransom
the mountains and the seas
the earth on its knees
begged mercy and things
being what they were
there was little remedy
for darkness and void.

3. NOW

A slow knowing that life
wants new distance
between us, the only way
to survive, a slackening
cord for tumbling aloft
in space, heartbreaking
grace for an altered us
two salvaged,
transformed beings.

4. NEXT

Are the months and days
as is customary on the calendar

in its inevitable position
on the wall in the inevitable
room where I write this,
wondering and watching
the predicted “rain/snow mix”,
considering turning
on the lights.

THE LEGEND OF YOUR BODY

I love the salt and heft of you, the warp
and weft of you – your bones light
on my yielding, your touch a full spectrum
of thermal heat, your breath an updraft,

your heart an engine converting
energy to useful motion,
your key in my ignition, foot on the gas,
fever mounting.

Twin island nations are your nipples,
rippling world of your strong back,
the constellation of your eyes
warm, creamy, and brown.

The body involuntary knows nothing
about love – only conveys the impulse,
conjoins particles, spins electrons
into orbit – a conduit for connection.

Under your weightlessness, my
insides open like a vase to the Sacred
Datura of your bud, offer shelter and water.
I'll apologize if I neglect these words,

courting the wreckage that could
proscribe tomorrow. Limbs and fingers
knot us into immortal selves,
lingering under a lovely curse.

ARCTIC CIRCLE

OUR TIME HERE ON THE GROUND WILL BE BRIEF

the pilot drones over the intercom
as we land, as if we don't know
the drill, passengers
on multiple stops
searching for stowage space
in crowded overhead bins.

Then the race
toward final destinations,
pushing upward against
a darkening sky as
the last purple bruise
of sunset caves in,

we shoot through the black
heavens at five hundred
miles per hour, at 36,000 feet
while our thoughts cinch down
on our trifling allotment
of time on earth.

JANIS

Listening to you as the sun sinks
into purple mountains, golden,
great bowl of lake calming itself
by degrees, wave by wave,
white torches on the water,
backlit by the setting sun, dimming,
like the light slowly going out
of you and Jimi when I was young.

I remember you
bending your pitches
like Texans stretch their vowels.
I want to slip under
the devastation of your voice
grasp your bold knowing
with my fingers.

I think of your friend Jimi, blue like you,
gone out by twenty-seven, of his guitar
god parody *the land of the free*
over the lost children
of the sixties like me.

Did you stalk your own thoughts,
attack yourself like an autoimmune disease,
your own plain magnificence,
ringing in your terrible trouble
as I listen.

IN CLEAR VIEW OF GOD

We live and die, once
prized and then forgotten,
the light
of youth wrested
from us by vagabond
time. To be stalked
by the rude face of death
is mundane as salt.
There is no packing
away *your troubles in an old
kit bag* nor putting them to rest
at night when death's arms
reach for us, warm
in our pools of bedding.

The best I can offer now
is the summer of our coming
of age, small comfort
for the blueness of this wound:
who could command
trees to keep their dying
leaves in fall, or the seasons
to stop cycling.

We worry the blooms
from the honeysuckle
in spring as though
we could keep
their fragrance new.
Nothing is random. All
continues as designed.

REMAINS

Black water rising
swirling like grief
or smoke
rinsing my body, baptism
in floods or sparks
of rain on yellow pollen.

Oh, look! There go the mothers
of the dead, heads tilted right
like suspicion or dread,
something like disbelief
clouds their faces as they
shed their children's worried faces
and walk away.

Where are the flowers? we say.
Yesterday, their golden splendor
waved to us from the field.
Now, every stalk, leaf and bloom
has gone into
crumbling brown earth.

JAM THUMBPRINTS

were the favorite Christmas cookies I made
every year with whatever of my

jams were on hand dabbed into the hollowed -
out center of the cookie. Now my winter-

cracked thumbs always lose their prints
until well into spring freeze-dried as they are,

shedding their identifying
marks as a sort of autonomous rebellion

in all the places I go, trails along the river,
my DNA everywhere.

Skin cracking also leaves
raw, sometimes bloody, remains,

band aids, wincing wine
bottle opening (opposing thumbs

the main culprit). I sometimes think
of this as a psychosomatic

condition, as if volition plays a part
in the anonymizing of me, a shedding

of self, beginning with thumbprints. Yes,
it makes perfect sense, a blackout

of identification, an erasure of tracks,
so there's no looking back.

WATER STORIES

I looked for the star lily
along the road. It must
have bloomed early
but pelting rain and wind had
darkened its parts.
Shrunken stems, stamens
hung dried on shriveled
petals, the flower stunted in an hour.

Sometimes I'm enticed
by water, my first home,
soft and muffled. Still, water
terrifies, suffocates, and I
went from that home
to another, mother receding
from me.

THE DAY AFTER

I.

My old age walked in
Without knocking and I didn't notice
That cold pearly
Gray hair claiming my scalp
Spots crawling my hands and arms
Sixty years of incandescent
Trouble in my face
Youth's tentative grip let go
Like falling leaves

II.

My brother shushed me two
Fingers on his lips when
I mentioned the funeral he said quietly
The hearing is the last to go
And then loudly *Mom we are all*
Here and we are OK you can go
Now

III.

She rocked up a little
Onto her elbows
The open shock of it reeling in her eyes
As she stared
Above our heads and right through the walls

She opened and closed her mouth three times
The air already gone
And closed her eyes

For a moment
Before the rain

NIGHT

falls like ash
from an eruption.
Gray envelops and isolates
each house
one by lonely one.

If I could show you how
its fingers stroke each
roof – its hollows and joints
blacken like chimney soot,

you might see night
crawl around porches,
hugging their round columns,
resting solemnly on the stair.
I've seen it there, finally
filling all the air.

FUNERAL

Precious residue
of life borne
in a fancy box
that will soon enter
the earthen mouth
opened recently by diggers
and ready to swallow all that is
left of a singular life.

Mourners proclaim
some maudlin portrayal
of an average person, the
perfect, faultless dead,
as if to disguise from us
death's shroud waiting
for us all;
our pale, inexact
longitude bending
toward the final
stars and moon
obscured by clouds.

THE GREAT ERASURE

I am watching for the time
when my shadow overtakes
my body, the great erasure
of self. Mother said
*we should die quietly
and not make a fuss.*

As I walk in marginal light,
the sun pressing at the edges
of clouds, I think
even death is close at hand.

She said
when day looms
or night when I take my
final flight
like that rainy morning
when sudden sun cleared
the sky, toying with an obvious
opening, mother said
don't borrow trouble.
Because of the sky,
I knew this would be true.

FACING THE MUSIC

--after Darwish's *A Music Sentence*

My Mother stalks
walks silent hallways
a gray image
swirling
like smoke

A girl like me
watches her pace.
How can that Mother be so real
to the girl who is crying?

A cat
steals a glance
at the gray image turning
corners. And now
the cat pads beside her.

Are these ghostly sightings
a vestige of grief
long overdue to end?

ANOTHER TIME

Slip your nest of tubes and wires,
despair clinging to your shoulders
like a heavy winter coat,
and fly with me to another time.

You have to believe grace,
a Chinook wind, warm
and racing will
outpace your demise.

In another time, we
would have shrugged off this trouble
like feathers, but we're old
now and know it.

We tell the words we told
as children, softly.
You were a cowboy, always
the risk-taker.

Now, the bucking bulls we're riding
are the days
themselves,
lemon yellow leaves pitching
headlong from the sky,

blazing, in a clear
margin of blue.
This wound so great
we stagger under its weight.

Driving home in stark
impending dusk, we sing
for mercy though there is none
for our pain.

LOOKING FOR ANYTHING

After things went south, the constellation
of your face darkened by minutes,
soft shroud of flannel baby
blanket obscured the moon and stars.
We knew they were there,
as on rainy days, you know by faith
the sun shines somewhere. Our eyes
knew but could not keep you,
your life the weight
of paper and twice as thin.
Burning out, spent, your body gave up
tiny sparks as it wasted, like a dream
fades on waking, or a sandcastle
crumbles as your frantic fingers
smooth its pointed features.
Your clenched fists were galaxies
never to be named or numbered,
your red veined feet
were maple
leaves in frost.
We were black holes sucked clean
of light
by your imploding star.
And this is where we are:
we thought we would live forever
in the grace
of your presence
and now you have taught us more
than we wanted to know.

STATUES

It is snowing hard in the schoolyard on the day
Kennedy is shot. The principal strides into
our classroom, blinded by something, whispers
to my seventh grade teacher.

Mr. Gelb liked my essay about Abraham
Lincoln. I guess I said something
about his political but not personal need
to end slavery. Dismissed

without the usual jocularly, we pile
into jackets and boots, file out silent
into the storm, moving away from the warmth
of the classroom. Dad's truck is in the yard

early and he and Mom are statues
leaning into the television. We haven't seen
before this crackling electric tension.
My sister and I tramp back out into the cold

to build a snow fort. The plow rumbles down
the street, its familiar groans and blinking
lights a relief as we roll the snow into balls,
and pack them together for shelter.

Snowballs, too, we stockpile while
time turns down the light to a mere
glimmer. Still no call to dinner, but blue
air swirls at the windows in the living

room where Mom and Dad are not
moving – the house dark and barely
breathing. We lay down in our snow
fort, indifferent to the world's trouble.

TSUNAMI

Odd items wash up on west coast beaches –
 shoes, buoys, plastic toys, a wooden boat
 carrying a cargo of water and live
 fish from the coast of Japan.

Cars, bumps and eddies in the surf,
 their primary colors spun around like toys
 in a draining tub. You don't know
 if there are people in those cars;
 children secured in fancy
 car seats, a mother's grocery list
 on the dash – *better stop*
to get cash. Every small detail –
 dad's recent promotion, grandma's
 published haiku, son's aching for approval,
 daughter's winning smile – all swirling
 like dreams in a racing tsunami soup.

I tell my face not to see the carnage,
 but I am drawn to it from my safety
 an ocean away. I try to hold
 compassion but it slips through
 my fingers.
 You should know that I would not
 trade my pre-school child
 for your dead one, my teenagers
 for either of yours – both now ashen
 in death, nor my bridge-playing
 grandma for yours who wears
 a shattered country like a shawl.

Who are you?
 What small thing
 I could say that would bring
 back your wounds that heal
 well in the damp womb
 of earth that is your ending.

BEACHED WHALE

One gray whale
flails on the sand
just short of the water.

One beached whale,
a body, gone the way of all flesh,

gone down
to uncertainty.

A bright half moon
glazes the dawn
sun
crawls up from the east.

We wait, hope to see
the birds, and buds
of spring.

AFTER THE CUTTING

Perfume of new
mown grass wafts to my bedroom
window which I've opened for this
bliss of lacy numbness.
But while the mower droned
it blocked all other sound
no crying baby, no staccato of siblings
playing horse in the driveway,
no canned laughter
spilling from the living
room like cheap wine.
For a sordid minute, after the cutting
and before the chaos curves back
faithful as tide,
I am a well of hope beneath the sky,
looking as if
in a mirror
for that frank arc of smile across
my face. Could this feeling linger
into dusk,
could I by concentration
make it stay?

THE COLORS OF GRIEF

Heaving blue ocean
offers no consolation, nor sky,
darkening any hope,
nor the green hills, waving,
in spring before
summer's heat taunts
and yellows their bodies.

Notice the colors,
pigments required
for life. Green hills
blue oceans,
white summer skies
their bruising, level gaze.

I DON'T REMEMBER THE BIRDS

They have darted
dangerously
close to my head or flown
at the car so
I barely missed mashing
their bodies in my grill.

I remember only vaguely their songs
so lilting,
floating like promises
among the green maple trees,
as they preened and nipped bugs from the bark.

I remember almost by accident
the red-wing flags of blackbirds pulsing
against a cerulean gasp of sky.
And there go the swallows, blue as
afterthoughts or lies.

But, I don't remember them reckless,
robins lingering in mud puddles
until the second before my tires splash
through and they wheel off,
a near collision, a lesson if I can
remember it.

BIRDSONG

My mind at risk for everything,
focused on this white void
in which we move at a leaden pace
toward spring while throngs
of thrush clot the mountain ash,
its branches heavy
with orange berries
in the backyard.

According to the birds,
it *is* spring, though each day
snow falls through their singing.

Two ruts in
our glaciated street
dream of wagon trails
over cheat grass
in Nebraska.

Unmoored and dangerous,
our car slips
on the ice
like a moose on a city sidewalk.

Memory mines down to spring
one winter month at a time.
One stratum of snow
dissociates itself from the next

creating hidden
planes at risk for avalanche.
Meanwhile, my mind at risk for everything,
peers into this white void.

SEASONAL

The front door remembers us
as we open the cabin
after the long solace of winter.
High hopes and high water
mingle at the river bank.
Where indeed did winter's snow
collect before cascading down
the mountains
in arcs of white
between granite outcroppings.

There is a reason love remembers
what rests between birth
and death. The lessons ebb and flow,
though I don't know why.
Even a child can see
the way stars seed light
into the universe.

Summer drifts catlike into June,
an unreliable witness, after the rain,
its pace febrile and taut as if
our lives depend on heat.
Fall startles with its early
morning chill while we take our coffee
on the dock, mugs warming our hands
after the hour that was summer.

SUNLIGHT
(After Josephina de la Torre)

Once I noticed tired September sunlight playing with an old red barn in the middle of a sprawling green field, turning its green to rust in the low afternoon light. The whole blue sky tracked it, a trick of light painting the barn into a melancholy corner of fall. Why we keenly feel this grief, the loss again, season to season is unknowable as the squawking geese move south, throbbing like skyward heartbeats. Hopelessness curiously flies along with the procession toward winter.

All the suns of the year
make their way
into our hearts, June,
wan and thin after winter,
July, bright, gaudy,
and warm, August,
a parade of hot color.
Now, the thinning
light of fall creeps
toward winter
sun leaking, sagging,
breaking into pieces,
as we
march away.

CONSTELLATION

LIQUID, FRAGILE, OR EXPLOSIVE

After handing my packages to the postal clerk, she asked if there was anything liquid, fragile, or explosive inside. I said, *no, these are family histories*. Then she asked if I wanted insurance. I thought *I didn't know you could insure a family's history, only its future*. And then I realized I lied about how liquid, fragile, and explosive was our history. About the many tears shed for my brother dead at twenty-six, and the baby girl who lived one hour, and the tiny uncle carried by my grandmother in a blanket on a train to the morgue by herself, my grandfather away at the logging camp, out of communication. And fragile – the way I was treated when I came home from St. Anne's home for unwed mothers, without the baby; or the weariness of my mother, pregnant for the eighth time, or my little brother's heartbreak as his older brother descended into madness

Explosive: anger at a dad who showed up drunk at the basketball game or raging at a detached, unsmiling mother not knowing why, or cutting my long hair short like a boy out of jealousy of my sister's success at everything she tried.

AT THE DUCK BLIND

On certain fall mornings,
Dad drove the pick-up across
the bridge and down river
to the duck blind. Fog smoked
up from the water's
chill dawn.

Decoys set, and our lab unleashed,
we waited for ducks
to flare up throbbing
like heartbeats in the sky.
He would sometimes turn
from birds, to the widening
calm,

The civilization of his face not
then in decline. How could I know by name
the sickness that would cave him in,
far from the duck blind.

When the smell of water
comes to me, I look
for his form in the fog
cradling his shotgun at dawn.

VERY LOOSE AMERICAN SONNET

Listen to the grainy notes of twilight
its minor keys gray as landscape,
a measured ceasing
of daily round, birdsong, movement, a settling
of accounts. Her hair brushed one hundred
strokes by level lamplight mending
fishnets or harness, folding again
the sun-dried diapers one by one,
exhaustion creeping through the floor
like paralysis.

The breathing that prefers the sleepy dark
gives in, lies down and closes its eyes,
covers pulled up to chin,
but in dreams carries on its labor.

WE KNEW THOSE SMILING BOYS

heroes of basketball, football,
senior prom. They shoveled
sidewalks and mowed lawns,
their rooms festooned

with hunting gear – rifles, bullets,
bulls-eyes. Stop sign from
a nearby corner, harvested
under a benign, vanilla moon.

Playboys swiped from Mrs. Wagner's
News and Gift hidden
away from the eyes
of adoring mothers
whose sons were holy.

Now white socks
lie inactive in the dust
under an empty bed
alive still with the singular scent
of boy.

We never knew when they stopped
being boys, when
their smiles
flapped and flew away.
to Fort Lewis and Da Nang.

SISTERS

Five girls lined up
for a photo in the yard,
homemade dresses
and mary janes, sisters
bruised by mere proximity
to each other.

Behind them, a darkening,
overripe sky, impending
storm and swing set
beginning to move in the wind
as parents aim for the perfect
shot, girls fidget and fret.

One starts to cry, one makes
a spyglass of her hand,
one lifts her dress, reveals
her big girl panties, one's
eyes downcast, lips
scalded into a frown.

They are terrified,
and happy
for this forced affiliation,
built-in friends and enemies
a convenient horde,
a family nation.

WHERE I AM FROM

I am from diapers hanging
on the clothesline, even in winter.
I am from too many kids and not
enough parents.
I am from colds and flu, measles
and mumps, strep throat.
I am from wall-to-wall carpet, two story
house with a basement rec room.
I am from a WWII hardware man who didn't
get along with his WWI hardware father
whose job in the trenches of France ruined him.
I am from a music and math woman
and two French grandmothers.
I am from Pacific Northwest adventures,
swimming, fishing, sailing.
I am from small town prejudices,
perceptions, and no college adviser.
I am from scrubbing pickling cukes
on the back patio.
I am from a family of huckleberry pickers
not allowed to eat them while picking.
I am from strict Catholic parents and fear
of not memorizing the Baltimore Catechism.
I am from grandparents who gave me
all of the books of the Saints Teresa.
I am from a nervous mother who, when I was twelve,
handed a book to me about menstruation.
I am from the librarian who queried me when I was checking
out books one Saturday about why I wasn't at the Kids Day Parade,
and I said *that's for kids*, and she asked if I had looked in the mirror recently.

KOKINSHU

There was a full or almost full
 moon, and stars
when we walked in the dark
 to Tony's house.
Stumbling over alligatored
 pavement
we arrived too early
 for the party,
the kindling for which
 just now lit.

A DESK IS NOT A MOON

but it may take you away
from everything known
to fly in space not imagined

where streams of words
like water stain the page
and people herd along
the lines their faces
and postures clear
in the holy light that is
possible only in the dark

near the shimmering moon
air swirls like ribbons
pulsing in a planetary dance

where streams of words
like water stain the page
and people herd along
the lines their faces
and postures clear
in the holy light that is
possible only in the dark

TWO HEMISPHERES OF LIGHT

Seven houses ago, I waited
till your breathing hummed
rhythmic and slow,
and crept out
into snow.
You slept as I collected
and swallowed stars
so that my lungs became two
hemispheres of light
leaking into the night,
my girlish body still, silver
maples black against
your window sill,
your steady hope for me
all that was good
but I was busy eating
the universe and would
not know.

ENDINGS

After the red sunset
burned down
to embers,
a brilliant mat of stars
quenched the last
thirst of day.

Here we are
fast between
beginnings
and end, not
quite knowing
the enormity of what we see.

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