Two hemispheres of light

Teresa Vanairsdale

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TWO HEMISPHERES OF LIGHT

A Thesis
Presented To
Eastern Washington University
Cheney, Washington

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

By
Teresa Vanairsdale
Spring 2020
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My sincerest thank you goes to Chris Howell, my thesis advisor, who was able to see something unique in my writing and to coach its best expression out of me. Chris is also a gifted teacher and I will always remember moments of sheer clarity which held the class spellbound.

I also want to thank my mentor, Jonathan Johnson, for guiding me on my journey to apprehend this art with generosity and spirited encouragement all these many years. A highlight of his oversight of my education was the Writing in the Wilderness class in Yellowstone, 2019. He was tireless in driving, helping with food, as well as leading morning and night treks for spotting animals. The best part of the day was the afternoons we shared our poems by the fire with Jonathan leading enlightening and productive discussions.

Further, I want to thank Natalie Kusz, for her friendship and for her complete dedication to our cohort academically.

Finally, thank you to my three readers, whose sharp eyes and open hearts helped me to make this work as good as it could be: Kerry Rutherford, Carol Peters, and Ruth Reynolds.
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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.
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.
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 jocularity, 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.
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
_Commando_ 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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