

Spring 2017

GRACE NOTES

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GRACE NOTES

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

Virginia G.R. Thomas

Spring 2017

THESIS OF VIRGINIA THOMAS APPROVED BY

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I. RUMBLE & HUM

Grace Notes

Together in the backyard, we watch
stars flicker to each other,
and I tell you how I once heard them singing,
high and clear, as I slept in the desert.

You tell me scientists have listened
to the energy the Big Bang left behind, and
the universe actually sounds
more like a distant train,
a faraway rumble and hum that deepens
as the walls of what we know to exist
expand, and I imagine a dozen white coats on a hill,
microphones held aloft like prayers or the moon,
recording the droning of space.

A satellite glides overhead, silent as a fish.

What tones would those scientists
hear between us? Into what buzz or wail
would our energy translate?
Or are we too small for sound?
Cygnus glitters.
A dog barks once.

My head. Your chest.
I listen to your heart
muscle spit and swallow,
the easy rhythm of your blood.
In the between-beats, the grace notes,
I hear you inhale
like an expanding universe.

Scientists On the Radio Discuss Black Holes

They say what remains
of anything drawn into their crushing gravity
is information, intangible, something
like memory, not liquid or gas exactly...
more like echoes and shadows,
smoke in a whirlpool.

The man on the train to Portland tells me
his name is Michael, and though he was never
there, he knows how the boat splintered
on the tidal wave, how
his friends lay naked and dead on the jagged shore,
blood matting hair.
“I was supposed to be there,” he says. A fishing trip,
jubilant, gorging on halibut, but “Mount St. Helens erupted
and I was two days late arriving in Alaska.”
He doesn’t want to be morbid, he says, peeling
the label from his beer,
but he must keep
their names sharp as
sparks on his tongue.
They lived, and with him, their story lives.

Later, I find
no record of these people, their bodies, a storm.
If a newspaper reported any of it,
the words dissipated like smoke.

It is the summer solstice, and
while you are at work I walk
through our house, fanning sage smoke
into a whirlpool,
banishing and blessing.

We leave fingerprints

on doorknobs, hair in the drain.
Our voices soak into the paint.
When we have left this place, the cobwebs
will wear our dust.
We are ghosts already.

Alaska Mountain Scars
to my husband

Our guide said an avalanche
had, decades ago, hurled itself down the mountainside,
crushed old growth.
Where ice had scraped stood
trees of lighter green – from the opposite slope
they appeared as a pale scar.

Remember hiking among those trees,
listening for their breath? We stood
at the mud-thick edge of
Icy Lake, dipped fingers into water
that proved worthy of its name, forgot
our own tongues for a moment.

We are, you sometimes say,
like different species.

I think of rain,
how it drops from fir
and hemlock needles, giving not a damn about Latin terms,
the same way snow cascades,
careless, battering.

Love, together we stretch from ice and mud,
inhabited by the same owl voices.
Yes, we differ: your pigment is brighter
than my muted hues. But I think

of Monet, daubing different shades
of green for each leaf and shadow until
a vibrant forest appeared.

Day Two

of your absence, and I still can't
fall asleep before midnight, despite the
Benadryl, the locked windows, the cat asleep
on the sofa, her tail twitching, placid, at ease.
My mind paces the house, sniffing
for you. You say, "I'll be back in a few weeks,"
your voice sunny, but it gets caught in those
Pacific Northwest clouds and comes to me
bruised and sodden.

I eat a salad, go for a walk, listen to the radio.
When you return, surely I will glow with vitality.

But when the night creaks at the door,
how can I ignore
thin edges of nerves,
exposed, electric and brittle
without you?

We married young. "We'll finish growing up
together," we said. But we also grew
into one another, like a grafted rose.
You are salve and bandage
to my wounds.
Small wonder I ache without you.

I Wait for My Husband to Come Home from Working the Night Shift

I wake suddenly. Dawn silvers the clouds
and, after making love to streetlights all night,
fog tiptoes down toward the bay.
I have been a wife for a month, adjusted
to nights alone, cat curled at my hip. I think of
the factory filled with fish, my husband's
gloved hands glimmering with scales, the solemn mantra
of the conveyor belt.
He is home by seven every morning
until today.

When I was seventeen, I developed
a habit of sneaking out at night. Stars curled
like smoke as my best friend—equally sleepless—slid
into the passenger side of my mother's gold Taurus.
One night we drove out past the sleeping Shoshone River,
among sagebrush, to Newton Lake where
we clicked off our flashlights
to watch bats swoop and dart, black angels
in a black sky, until something
to our left—some animal I have never
identified—growled low in its throat
and my tongue went steel

as it does now at the absence of my husband's car.
I am 20, too young to know how long
one waits before reporting a missing person or who
to call; his voice is faint through the receiver
as he reminds me to "leave a message."

Even after he strides through the door, smelling
of the enormous tuna he was paid overtime to haul
from the belly of a blood-slick vessel,
the prickling at my neck continues, a sensation
of being examined
by shadows.

Newlyweds

In the damp Pacific town that harbored us
that first petal-delicate year of marriage,
rain fell timidly. The bay, too, kept its waves
respectable, small, lapped quietly at pebbled shores.
It was enough.

Nights we twined limbs, mumbled
to each other like rising streams.
We hadn't finished mapping the landscape
of our bodies, hadn't yet looked up
to see if the rain had stopped, whether
the sea was calm enough to cross.

But our dreams
spoke of boats.

Bangkok

Rain here sounds angry, desperate, as it thrashes the hotel's garden into frantic quivering. Sprawled naked on white sheets, we listen to footsteps in the tiled hallway, a voice calling out, and the rain's reply.

We shower three or four times a day, rinse away salt, practice our Thai as we towel off:
Chai, yes, *mai*, no, *kob kun ka*, thank you.
We do not know the word for *comfort*, but when we hold hands in our sleep, it's there between our sweaty palms.

Dust Motes

The moon floats in the sky,
a pale, illuminated wedge of lemon,
as the plains fade in our peripherals.
A motel's sign proclaims MOTE,
naming the brevity of our glinting.

Our lives are small.
I wash dishes until my hands
turn into starfish.
You pluck twigs from branches, burn dust,
trying to predict the coming of our dawn.

I picture us in a former existence: I bound my hair
every morning
while you sang your rain song to the clouds.
Next life, perhaps we eat plums, lips
sticky-sweet, or we'll be fireflies
flickering in silent joy.

Dust motes always come
to land somewhere,
until stirred again to starry
brilliance by a sigh or a laugh.

Starting Fires

I like to watch you start fires.
You breathe life into embers
so gently
the trees are surprised when you crack
their limbs. I'll let you pick the dry grass
from my hair. You can't have the dead leaves
in my pocket.

In the flat gray almost-dawn
I hear roots chanting to worms.

My skin burns fever-bright.
Don't you know?
Lightning-struck, a tree
can burn from within.

I could return the favor.
I could set you alight.

When you look up, stars
snuff themselves out, no longer
fairest.
If you don't stop looking at me
like that,
I swear
I'll burst into flame.

Near Miss

When two aircraft just barely avoid collision
it is called a near miss.
Reporters speak of it with false relief, no harm done.

We have been a near miss,
have avoided collision so carefully
for so long, planned separate paths until you no longer
pick up on my signals. Awake in the middle of the night,
I trace your departure dates in air.

You are *always* taking off, no waiting for an all-clear,
you just *go*, leaving me on the runway,
not running
but weighing, heavily, my options.

I can try to continue this,
keeping track of your trails, your patterns.

With stolen flashlights, I might
wave you on down,
knock gently in Morse code
I've been here all along.

I could throw all my damn flight plans into the stratosphere
and turn toward you, impact be damned.

Burning

Smoke circles from every direction.
Your fingertips brush mine in passing.
I could be electric in your veins.
I could swim through this haze, sniff you out,
press you to my tongue like a communion wafer.

Let's commit treason in the next room.
I'll teach you to read my goosebumps like Braille.
I want to bathe in wine, watch the spill
flow sweet and dark over your pale shoulders.

Paper disintegrates between us.
Your fingertips brush mine.
I see my embers reflected in your eyes,
and I forget to breathe.

Forbidden Ink

“Forbidden” is stamped upon every inch
of your skin,
and the ink runs down your wrists,
elbows,
toes,
and in a rivulet,
from the corner of your mouth.

Black rain
falls from your fingertips,
whispering
“No, no, absolutely not.”
Were I to graze your shoulder,
my skin would retain the

telltale taste of you,
dark and bitter
as the ink
on this page.

Unrequited

In the mirror, she watches
as my ribs move under my skin like gills.
Her broken bones are knitting,
she says, plucking feathers from her back.
Soon you won't even be able to tell.
I open my mouth,
but only gape soundlessly.
She has a tattoo of an anchor
on her tongue. Safe harbor, any port.
First kisses are death wishes,
always. I weigh more than most birds.
Nobody's perfect, she says,
spitting teeth. Cold hands seek out
ribs first, gentle pulse,
careful of the soft spot
on the cranium.
She likes to watch my wide isinglass eyes
go still. She likes the way the net gathers
like mourners around me.
She's forgotten how to play
her tarnished harp.

To Eat A Cactus

The heart of a cactus is tender
but the slender spikes
cannot be sliced off without sacrificing flesh.
Pluck each needle carefully, totally,
to expose the weeping meat.

Discard the spines, they
are blood and bad luck.
Probe gently for them with lips and tongue,
consume the cactus whole, but do not

be surprised when spines grow in your belly.
The jealous plant will stab
everything within you and complain that you eat
only because you are selfish.

Once the spines are inside you, there is no removal.
The needles must grow
until soft pink tissue conceals
and protects what has been pierced.

I did not know this, and
I still find cactus spines
in my lips,
find punctures in my skin.
Beware.
Bright cactus blossoms will seduce you.
They know exactly what they're doing.

Sorrow Flower

Walking the alleys of Chiang Mai,
I plucked and placed in my hair
a plumeria blossom. Thick white petals
surrounded a center glowing yellow.
A passing local laughed, saying
plumeria are typically worn only
by a bride on her wedding day.

I threw the blossom over a wall.

The local did not say
that this flower, perfumed with superstition,
is planted only in tiled temples, opulent palaces, is
tended by ghosts, placed in the golden palm
of the Buddha, represents the fragility of life.

In Thai, plumeria is called *lantom*, like *ratom*,
the word for sorrow.

But *lan* means to break away,
escape from grief,
and within my husband's arms,
I am free from withered flowers
and their phantom gardeners, and sorrow
is nothing more than a scented breeze.

Late April and girls are

 blossoming
 out of their clothes, all
 shoulders and smooth calves,
 skin sweet as whiskey
 and I think I could overdose on beauty.

Honey-eyed Whitman knew
 vernal madness, blue stain of morning-glories
 against a whitewashed windowsill,
 sweet
 scent of lilacs newly open, budding boughs
 like pink mouths.

 O Walt, how did you recover each year
 from this frenzy?
 Did gossamer names of lovers
 brush past your blazing lips at night
 and
 did you drop a stone into your pocket,
 one for each voice that spoke your knees
 into tremors,
 each skirt that swished you into a dream,
 each neck that broke
 you into a sweat?

The body is electric, you knew
 flickering within the wrists,
 incandescent hunger of flesh.

But when May heat shocked dandelions into
 white afterimage, did you count stones
 mourn the broken fever's agony?

 Or

 did you fold away your desire
 to wait and listen
 for the rustling of spring in your bones?
 I think spring boiled in your marrow, Walt,
 your footprints melted December snow,
 grass resurrected under your breath,
 and if you bled, birds wept like it was April

again, so tell me
 how to keep burning,
year-round,
like a radiant blossom.

Dear Spokane

Spokane, I am curled tight in your fist,
 exhausted
 from chasing my own taillights
 down your one-way streets.
 I dragged my belongings here,
 toward the rising sun.
 The light is harsher here but welcome, still.
 You've given me another shot.

You smell of lilacs and cottonwood,
 of concrete and urine.
 Your art is dirty, your paint is new,
 your motto is lightning, is blood, is clouds of vapor,
 e-cig fake smoke floating over a haze of weary men
 and gleaming women.

Princess of the inland empire,
 where are your gems?
 At the bottom of your polluted river?
 In the darkened wings of a downtown stage?
 Under the blue glow of a burrito joint
 crowded with bodies, lungs sucking in the ache
 of the heart?

You hide from me, lilac city,
 city of the children of the sun,
 of metal and ink and timber.
 Your alleys hear me, but on your streets,
 every step rhymes with a word you don't know,
 a faraway something that doesn't jive
 with Washington, where everything is
 continually bathed in do-overs.

Spokane, Spocompton, Spokaneistan,
 spoken, spat, splashed across every doorframe,
 scrawled on street signs, sprawled over your bridges:
 you are a place for second chances.

I remain semi-alien,
 press my ear to your curbs,

hope to receive a signal.
Your corners don't forget their beggars.
Your parking lots echo with the hum of hope.
Let me write my name on a small
piece of you that bears no shame.

II. BRUISED

Povety

It's raining
again. Through a dirty window I watch
it fall heavy and
cold from tufts of green needles.
My husband turns
each thermostat
to zero. Our electricity
bills gulp his feeble paychecks.
He says, "We'll just have to start
bundling up indoors."
I almost remark that in this weather,
we already wrap up outside,
so not removing our coats will
make things oh-so-easy.
But he wouldn't laugh.
Nothing is clean anymore.
Laundry, stained and mildewing,
overflows its baskets.
The cat box will never escape
its ammonia stench, the table
never see a crumb-less day, and
soon the shower drain will request a comb.
Grease on our once white stove
defies every sponge and spray.
I pray to the stingy god of food stamps.
I inspect my contact lenses each morning,
wipe away the clouds,
hope for soft, fresh pairs
to fall from the sky
like cool, clear rain.

Novaturient

(adj.) desiring powerful change

January rain taps on the library roof,
 on brown and gray roofs across the river, on
 slick black pavement, lingering piles of dirty snow,
 on bare and reaching
 branches of trees that long for the weight
 of April blossoms.

Neglecting tests to be graded, essays to write,
 ghostly doubt mutters in my ears,
who do you think you are?

I watch two joggers move in matched strides
 on the black paved trail below, their white shoes
 tapping in unison,
 white breath struggling to rise
 against the rain.

I imagine that when they arrive home, strip away
 soaked sweatshirts, they will release a sigh
 heavy enough
 to keep their restless feet
 from fluttering off to other paths.

I've taken to cursing airplanes under my breath. I wake
 at night to hear them sighing
 a thousand feet above, a sound
 like the cat's purring contentment as she settles onto my chest,
 like tires sighing over gray concrete to elsewhere,
 a sound like certainty, like purpose.
 Even the clouds seem to rush eastward, a herd
 of white buffalo with dreamers to taunt.

Fingers of water clover

why do you remain? here
under November sunset's pale violet light,
snow has come to rest like white blossoms
upon your green and
delicate fingers on still water.
ice spreads starlight skin over the surface;
your color, vibrant, trembles.

you of shallow pools beside
the powdered trail, you of the sleeping stream,
of valley where sparrows sing in the brambles,
we did not plan for each other.

forgive me if
your colors stain my lips.
forgive my summer skin, numb
and stiff in a pleated twilight – if
i stay, will i crystalize?
would my absence shrivel you?
how can i be green in the long nights
of frost and footprints of black crows?

my pulse slows, waiting
in the snow for your roots
to release you.
you see, mine will never grow.

Searching Roots

Oh little slender reed, who stretched up
toward late summer constellations –
unexpected frost has turned you ghostly
where edges of water bite.

Your blossom's delicate scent, exposed,
found the air acrid.
Your wistful reaching halted and
then shrank.

When did the stars desert their lullaby?

A green echo thrums through your searching roots,
bare, kindling, vivid as any
bloodshot moon, after which
a velvet silence
that cannot bear
to be touched.

Late Autumn Evening

The trees weep slender icicles.
Across the Spokane river
the twin crucifixes of Gonzaga
illuminate wet untidy streets,

Streets that simmer
like the silence
before a storm.

I imagine my prayers getting caught
in the clouds
or falling into the water,
from which geese pluck
and swallow them.

Fish slip through
the water like a woman sheds her dress,
like clouds scudding across sky.
They glide above silt,
numb to the darkening river.

House of Dreaming

In youth, we were moon-skinned like
godlings. We
shook the light from our sleeves, our
glissando laughter
glittered under white birches,
every crimson
platelet thundering through our
fluttering ventricles
dream-sang to the spirits of spring
Hallelujah, hallelujah.

The weather is changing.
Moths shiver
on windowsills. Each drop of milk in my tea thinks
of uncurdling.
Steam glazes mirrors in long white halls where
twilight becomes
sharp and ordinary, like a baby's fingernails or
a flare
of music before the credits sweep the screen.

Bruised Peach

Skins (overripe
and browning at the bruises)
slip off under my fingertips. I slice
each fruit's equator, feel
the knife bite against stone
at the heart of sweet flesh.
Two pounds of yellow crescents
reduce to four small jars
and a splattered kitchen.

I wipe my way across the linoleum
on my knees, a pilgrimage of bleach.

From the radio perched on the windowsill,
voices of keening women. Their children have
been swallowed up, children whose fists fluttered
against uterine walls
and beat against sky and now
grip black flags or else
the ropes at their wrists.

A reporter in the studio
boils down numbers,
toneless. Names of cities. Names of rebel leaders.
For the dead,
only numbers.

The small speaker emits sound of sirens wailing,
voices crying out, sound of thunder? No, airstrike. A child

squeals on the next block over—
for an instant I think *body*, think *bullet* —
as she shows her silent father
how high she can bounce on a trampoline.

How bloodless,
how sterile these streets.

I gather shreds of golden fruit
in a paper towel shroud, my knife sticky.

The reporter has moved on to this election's
candidate-gods and the voters who cheer at their feet.
This is the sort of violence I live in.

So why does my peach-fuzzed heart briefly shrink
at a shadow the sun throws down from an airliner?

Dear Mr. Hubble

So tell me, what would we do
 if the Universe started contracting, anyway?
 Would we stop giving each other the finger in traffic or
 sending drones to annihilate hospitals, markets, neighborhoods?
 Would we forget— the way a child forgets infancy – how
 we could burn cold with acid hate, the haunting
 headstone weight of mortality?
 If it were a meteor, say,
 or a rapidly expanding sun,
 we'd be dramatic
 about the whole affair—
 as we tend to be— and we'd run
 into the streets, embrace strangers, or
 else tooth-and-claw tear into one another,
 blinking
 ourselves out a little faster.
 Either way, we'd go out blazing.

No, if all of existence started a slow exhale,
 we'd be just as slow to mourn and mend, gradual as daffodils.
 Oh, we'd feel the velvet whisper of the walls of the Universe
 shushing toward us every now and again,
 when the sun slanted just right in the golden spaces between leaves, maybe,
 or a neighborhood cat tore a squirrel to
 pink pieces on a rain-blackened street,
 but mostly, we'd ignore it
 the way we shake off nightmares and the
 open palms of those who curl
 like fetuses in doorways on slick February nights.

But I'd like to think that every third time or so that this gray and electric
 awareness came buzzing back,
 we'd forgive the woman who cuts us off in her BMW,
 toss a coat on the homeless guy.

I like to think, sometimes, that the code for
 compassion is written somewhere in the quietest recesses
 of our cells and does not need a meteor
 to set it soaring through us.

Sacroiliitis

“An inflammation of one or both sacroiliac joints — situated where [the] lower spine and pelvis connect.” – Mayo Clinic

My hips sound as if they're full of rocks,
 the *tock* and *click* of shifting joints audible
 through muscle and flesh
 as if they tumble
 when I stand, stretch.
 I listen to my sacrum argue with my earlike ilium.
You're such a pain in the ass.
“But I'm not the one out of place.”

This quarreling body
 wakes me at night to pray for relief
 from star-shaped pain
 even in dreams, until
 I would sail a bone-white ship into a shore
 of silent needles, each the length of my radius.

This pain hums
 like a plucked wire.

Perhaps my bones sing back to broken
 star-stuff of which we are made,
 and now the vibrations
 shake me apart until I split at my sacred center,
 where I am symmetrical when folded.

Seeking relief,
 I bend into myself, I rock and lean in penance.
 This is the toll for crossing into
 corpus, for separating from stars.
 Everything aches to rejoin the whole.

Listening to Water

The Elwha River is frigid, even now, late July.
I can almost hear mountaintops in its rush and rumble,
cold snowmelt tumbling over and into rapids.

Downstream, a different tone of cold as
the river disintegrates into green sea.

~~~

Humans have the ability  
to hear differences in the temperature  
of running water. Go to the nearest sink, turn one tap,  
then the other. You'll hear it.

~~~

I listen as the flow from the tap
lowers to baritone.

I sink down, hold my body still.
The water in the tub calms.
Lungs expand and I can almost believe I am a storm,
so loud is my exhale.

If I pretend I am dead, cease breathing,
I can hear my heart like rhythmic thunder.
If my veins held water,
what temperature would I be?

To My Shoes on the Beach

I will return.

I will slip, numb and clumsy, back into you,
grateful for blood washing into toes.

But here, at the edge,

I feel the water suck sand from under
my feet, and I remember

the stinging in my lungs that summer
a wave knocked me down, scraped me
across seafloor, a thrumming in fingers and throat,
flash of recognition, choice: be limp as seaweed.

Acquiesce. Blur
into waves.

Or convince burning arms to reach,
embrace bright panic.

I rose from that wave, stumbled,
sick from breathing water.
Still it remains: the unquietness,
roaring in my ears, absence of stillness.

Here where small water licks ankles,
I hear it.
But the half-built castle of sand,
the keening gulls on the cliff,
and you, my dutiful shoes, call me back,
call me by name,
syllables unknown to deep water.

An Evening
after Mark Strand

Marquette, Wyoming was flooded for the construction of the Buffalo Bill Dam in 1910.

It trails behind me at night: that evening I drove
my mother's car out past the gray dam,
mountains opening like French doors in the twilight,
and pulled over across from the reservoir.
Little waves washed the white rocks
and the hollow hum of cars in the tunnels
sank into the mountains of pale granite shrouded in brush.
I sat like a pole star, watching clouds drift over the drowned town,
dark sibling, until, by an inner beseeching,
I waded in past the driftwood and felt ripples
run from me, the chill of breathlessness,
felt the rush of silence fill my ears.

O₂

Oxygen is odorless, colorless,
and – like my husband’s grandfather, Cliff,
who reads the paper in his easy chair, plastic tubing
emitting a *hiss*
of oxygen into his nostrils every few seconds – quiet,
nearly unnoticeable
until it’s not there.

French scientist Antoine Lavoisier, in 1774, was the first to grasp
oxygen’s role in life. He thought (mistakenly)
it existed in all acids,
named the element “oxygène,”
“oxy,” sharp, “gen,” producing.

Sometime when he speaks, there is a sharpness to Cliff’s voice,
an edge of impatience, maybe sparked by the steroids, maybe by
the tubes that snake across the floor, or the cancer
that has kindled in his body again and again and again.

So vital, yet oxygen is only 21 percent of the air we breathe.
My husband, as he prepares
for his first scuba diving trip, explains:
a delicate balance
of gasses, oxygen and nitrogen,
his descent in water.
I don’t quite grasp the science, the technicalities, but
I picture him in dark, silent water,
breathing rhythmically.
He insists he’ll be okay, he knows which valves to turn,
his instructor will be there, *if*.

When Cliff leans against the kitchen table, hands braced
on the edge, I can’t tell if he is trying to catch his breath or
listening for liquid in his lungs or if he is thinking
of the soft breath of the infant grandson asleep upstairs.

Ascend too fast, my husband explains,
and a diver’s lungs can burst like an overfilled balloon,
the oxygen expanding with the decrease in pressure.
He lists the things that can go wrong,

assures me they won't.

Cliff's oxygen concentrator hums in the corner,
the white noise background to every conversation
and the baby's crying, the babble of the television. It will cease
only when his breath does.
How quiet it will be then.
How still.
Like the bottom of the sea.

Decay

The leaves have died. Bright
as tears, they escape on
the stream's current as
swiftly as they first unfurled
in spring, when you were here.

Serena and the Egg

Her father's dovecote
 smells of feathers and dust and dung.
 The birds blink, passive as snow-blind infants.
 I slip in behind her. We are five years old
 and have dressed a legion of blonde Barbies,
 destroyed her bedroom in the flingings-on
 and off of all manner of frilled and beaded skirts,
 spied on her blonde brothers and begged them to play.
 We are supremely bored.

Her small hand curves around an unguarded egg
 and the doves worry softly in their throats.
 She turns toward
 the open door -- her eyes dark
 and twinkling -- winds up, pitches --

there is a shattering like teeth,
 a mixing of mud and yolk.

"Come on," she says. "Again."

The egg is a warm moon in my palm.
 I imagine the *pop* it will make against the dirt.
 I imagine her father, his gravel voice grinding out our names
 as he discovers our child-crime; I imagine
 my mother's face going inscrutable, pale as shell.

In the breathless moment of my hesitation,
 Serena seizes the egg from my hand.

Her arm curves again like a rearing snake
 and the egg slides through the air
 and the splat
 crack
 blood
 are quieter than I could have guessed.
 A spot of scarlet seeps into noiseless gray dust.
 A film of metal settles on my tongue.
 A darkness hatches within me.

Aspen Poem

after William Carlos Williams' "Willow Poem"

At winter's end, it is an aspen
in the cemetery
from which dangle small catkins
like velvet fringe.

Buds swell,
pale bark blushes green
before the blank windows of the mausoleum
as if admiring their reflections,

they are so plump, so robust with
chlorophyll pulsing through resurrected veins –
oblivious to autumn's executions,
the first to burst into
leaf and shade the dead.

Helix

A single beam of blue-white streetlight
streaks the blinds.

If only the pine outside my window
had grown an extra branch.

If only Rosalind Franklin had chased
those boys, Watson and Crick, down
the spiral staircases of the double helix
to claim her prize, her immortality,

instead of dying, age 37, from cancer,
like Madame Curie, 66, like my mother, 46, who
wept the first time she passed a lingerie section,
knowing she would never again fill lace
the way the models did with their double curves.

If only her helix had stayed where it was,
instead of chasing its tail like a mad kite.

If only my cells hadn't mirrored hers
I wouldn't be in bed,
so awake,
under a wounding blue-white beam.

Amazing Grace

He unzips my black dress
 and I step out like a breath leaving a body.
 "A lovely service," they said.
 Better place. At peace. With god. Bullshit.

~

I once watched snow submerge a man. Mountain
 became white wave. I left before they found his corpse,
 got drunk in the empty bar, vomited red merlot onto
 the snow. His was the first death I saw.
 The whole community came to his funeral, I heard.

She fit perfectly into her box, and her box fit
 perfectly into the ground, where her small body could
 join the others and they could tap Morse messages
 to each other. Not that the dead have much to say.
 Meanwhile, the living can't seem to stop,
 their agile tongues bounce off their pink gums.
 "My condolences." "I'm so sorry." "We brought a casserole."
 Thank heaven he pressed a hand against my ass
 as I slid the fourth bowl of fruit salad into the fridge.

~

I slide my fingers through his warm hair,
 and he stiffens as my chest meets his.
 Our lonely bodies nest into each other,
 merging the way the dead cannot,
 as we each chase *petite mort*,
 temporary remedy against
 so much useless living.

III. MAID, MOTHER, CRONE

Malignus

I watched Mama bury gold in our backyard.
The horse breathed silver clouds over her,
his white eyes rolled.

Nearby, cattle screamed in their sleep.
Their echoes, she said, were the bitter cry of Eve
leaning on the locked gates
of Paradise. A horse once told me
that a woman is worth only a loaf of bread.

Mama held my hand. Mud beneath her nails
creased my palm.

Gold ignites stampedes. A horse
can't bear his dull shoes if they are
outshined by another's brilliance.
Better to hide anything that gleams.
Better to offer apples.

The closest thing to an apple is flesh.
All Mama had left was blood.

Later, I called warnings in my sleep.
It sounded like cattle sobbing.

Seventeenth Summer

I practically lived at Beck Lake then.
No week passed without a visit
to the fishing pier jutting into green-gray water.
We carved the year into that pale wood
and dared each other into the icy, rippling lake.
We brought half-eaten bags of potato chips,
leftover sweets pilfered from drawers.
Girls in vibrant bikinis pressed themselves
to the planks, willed sunlight to cross
through their skin and into their eyes,
listened to water lapping gently at the pier.
Rib-thin boys pranced and whooped,
beating their hollow chests
and plunging into the swells
like meteors from the heavens.
The breeze was a gift through my hair,
the cloudless sky an endless maybe.
Dripping, giddy, we circled each other
in a blithe animal dance.
The summer sun would never again appear
as bright, already the wind
was whispering
of frost and black water.
At night we watched the electric lights
bounce on the face of the lake, and
under the watchful ever-humming stars,
felt the bank shift under our soles.

To Ribbons

I watched all those eggshells
 turn to mud. Dignity
 became paper dolls.
 Everywhere you went – little cyclones in your wake
 smelling of whiskey and ink.

Mother was a moth trapped against glass, frantic;
 you a simmer, an electric fence,
 a beetle chewing through her bark,
 you a clinging vine, a goshawk cry.
 You a puff of smoke.
 She a river, dammed. And
 it all broke – cascades of
I'm done, I am done
 blurring everything but the pattern
 of the carpet. Which of your thistle words,
 which glance
 shook free the last roots
 of those decades?

You, chest-deep in mud. You, to ribbons.
 You a frost, creeping through
 a house of windows turned mirrors.
 You wandered through dreams
 in which your red-haired grandmother
 handed you a teaspoon and said, "Dig that splinter out."
 You who shaded my newborn eyes with your hands,
 who witnessed the first knots
 in my laces, who whistled robinsong – you stood
 curve-shouldered,
 wet-eyed,
 listening
 at the threshold of my room one night,
 and I breathed a sleep-sigh
 to comfort you.

Fragments & Flowers

Walking fences is a tour of alfalfa blossoms
and gouges in white wood where horses
have ground wide teeth on round rails.
Pale lavender deepens to indigo, full
of Wyoming dusk—each blossom
serenades, siren-like, those equine tongues, each thin jade wrist
offers its fragrant purple jewel.

The horses' thick lips delicately
embrace flower and leaf and stem,
they fill their smooth bellies.

Even this summer treasure cannot soothe the hollow jaw,
the ache of the tame,
so they gnaw fences,
swallow splinters until they are swollen
with fragments and flowers.
Only then can horses begin to take on the hues
of dusk, last splinters of sunset
fading into the color of alfalfa.
Standing in twilight, still as posts,
they listen to an inner symphony
of blooms and slivers.

In the Wings

Little horizon-cloud,
I worry the wind will
whip into tornadoes by the time you drift here. Lately
light streaming in the window
has seemed fragile, sharp

as broken shells. I dream again that I sing
your aubade into water, that I burn
the syllables
of your name, protective spells.

Until you arrive, I twist
grass into prayers. I drop stones
from my mouth like rain.
For now, you wait in the wings.

Maid, Mother, Crone

I.

Your light is fading, little daffodil, small
 sunsplash. Never mind the
 gray-blue of winter nights creeping.
 Your bright face brought
 a blur of bees in its season, and wasn't it swell?
 April snows sounded like promises to you
 who had never heard a threat,
 who pushed up through half-frozen soil because
 what else could you do but reach
 for a sun that you couldn't believe
 would disappear, would sink back to sleep.
 Don't hang your head, blossom, darling, don't
 blame the earth for turning.

II.

Like a pomegranate, I say
 when you ask what it feels like to be pregnant.
 Like fullness, droplets of blood-colored
 seeds, gems in a diadem.
 Then, like multiplying and dividing
 all at once.
 Inner sanctums split,
 fracture within themselves, a thousand
 mirror shards bear tilted versions
 of your face. A purple curtain rends.
 And the rest?
 Rather like swimming in ink.

III.

Skin. Hair. Light.
 Everything but memory grows thinner,
 wisp of smoke dissipating in still air.
 The afternoon wanes on.
 Yellowed stalks, under which
 white mushrooms swell, replace April's
 blue and vital forget-me-nots.
 Feel slender footprints printed in the dust
 beneath you. Each leaf withers into itself,
 whispers of flight and decay.

These bones grow heavy.
You would like to rest.

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