

Cadenza

by Lucy Zhao

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Lucy Zhao

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Readers

Keith Taylor and David Hornibrook

Acknowledgements

Language is fossil poetry
—Emerson

I'm proud to share with you this collection of excavated fossils, a feat for which I must thank Keith Taylor and David Hornibrook. They sifted through each word with a sharp pick and a fine brush. I'd like to thank my first poetry teacher, Tina Richardson, for showing me where to dig and the teachers at NELP for equipping me with the tools of discovery. I thank my parents, my little brother, and my boyfriend for their endless support as I now wash my dusty hands and wait for all to settle.

Abstract

In many ways, this poetry collection ponders emptiness as much as matter. It explores the spaces between people and inside our bodies, spaces of distance and spaces of time. Outerspace is placed in dangerous and wondrous proximity to our lives. Many of these spaces are liminal in nature, confused and growing. They represent a boundary to traverse, and we are left with the challenge of crossing the chasm.

This thesis is a cadenza, an improvised solo beyond previously composed classes, readings, and exercises. As you delve in, I hope these poems bring you to a place of confronting your own unknown. As you move forward into that haze, you begin your own cadenza, your own unwritten space.

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The great summer blackout

leads to basins of water settling around the house, dry mouths from emptying ice cream, clothing changes in gray rooms. New discoveries are made: the temperature differential between doorknobs, divots in bare floorboards, unexpected extra steps in stairwells. Bodies find reasons to stay still, breathe stale air, rub at the fuzzy gray matter of brain.

We come to understand the pounds in pregnant power lines, sagging along our horizon. We come to understand our magnetized poles, pulling us from the solitude of white space. At night, we leave our beds be, gather in the center of the living room with cool sheets. We build fortresses with our bodies, tumbling together in sleep. Mothers next to grown daughters, traveling sons, estranged fathers next to mothers.

In suburban areas, the Milky Way and orbiting satellites wink at the naked eye. In the absence of particulate light pollution, we see the hurling galaxy of Andromeda come for us.

Air

You bet
you can pick me up,
my slight bundle
of sinew and skin.

How much do I weigh
anyway? Last summer,
I sweat, snapped
my chewing gum
until its sickly sweet
gone, stretched my limbs
long from running
in circles.

I loaded boxes
of books at the library,
heaved resin bindings
before the big renovation.
I hugged the thickest
volumes, moving.

And then I leapt
against your body.
Your muscles pumped.
And air
all around me,
its sudden, weightless
gravity.

A Summer Horoscope

I bring you washed raspberries. We eat them under glow-in-the-dark ceiling stars, standard issue in children's wards. We breathe iodine air. I thread soft fingers over your once thick hair. This is the taste of space. They've proven it, researched the compounds. So for all those bake sales I missed, for the joke I made once when you were a baby about reversing motherhood, for the road trips we will never take, we eat raspberries. We eat star matter.

Performance Art

her name is Marina
 in all black, heavy fabric
 dress, long sleeves, turtleneck,
 face flat, eyes shut, dusky bun
 pulling hair and skin back,
 standing still

holding a bowl of milk
 as long as possible,
 12.7 minutes of milk
 at the brim of glass, white
 wet splash tracing fingers,
 hitting floor, flooding dress,
 shaking hands, she tires
 and collapse

bowl shatter
 and shatter
 bone
 white splatter,
 the sound
 of matter
 hitting matter,
 we blink
 faster

as we return to the parking lot,
 soft snow frosting the windshield.
 in the dark, in dull headlights
 we practice patience, hold close
 the memory of our mothers
 as the road stretches ahead
 and we travel nowhere
 and everywhere.

Love!

I am sitting in the dark to let my mind cut corners, jump from dirty freckle to broken ankle to last Saturday when you threw words at me. *Don't treat me like a child.*

I don't know how else to hold you. This isn't the first time you've hurt me with your stiff spine, your ivory wing bones. Kicking out, collapsing cages I can't see.

Whose joke is this? For mother to watch the planes of your face shift, turn structurally unsound, bitter. The architect surely drunk on theory.

The other day, you told me you felt sick, and I heated the stove. In the kitchen at 3am, my skin tainted with moonlight. I knew how much sugar. I knew how much milk.

Architecture is the only art you can't help but see. Avoid paintings, music, even history. As to fleeing architecture, it means sitting in the dark, alone.

In This Order

I swung from my father's arms
into the next galaxy, past broken
bicycle, burned brussels sprouts,
the makeup class with mom
at the community center. we rubbed
pits of fruit and sugar on hands, softening
skin, coated in amber nectar.

I ran building to building,
peered through dark windows
at empty desks, at silence swollen
behind locked doors, traced the path
of classes. summer ended in hands
holding notebooks, campus maps,
hair ties with old paperbacks.

I packed the artifacts of 7 years
in marriage, watered the dying
plants, escaped green shutters, borrowed
shoes. my hair and the open window,
strands flying, length in lightyears.
I swung from my father's arms
into the next galaxy, past broken

Two halves of the story

My grandfather tells
stories of fishermen and wishes.
He rewrites *Gulliver's Travels*
in the old language, Chinese
like potatoes boiled too long,
soft as I fall asleep.
In these tales, he threads
memories, so that I think
even he forgets
which is which.

My grandfather puts brush
to paper, outspring of ink
mountains. He fled there
at Japanese bombs, joined
the Red Army, became the giant
in story books, numb
to tiny ropes, tiny pain.

My grandma makes
dumplings for breakfast,
her swollen joints rubbing
round pockets of meat
and dough. Kneading
tight packages
like the ones she sent
my father over New Years
at a university too far
to come home from.

My grandmother puts lids
over her tea to keep out
the dust. At seventeen,
she wore all red.
A little extra allowance
they gave, the days
her period came.

Witness

after Laura Kasischke

When I saw your body
inside the plaster of prison
for juveniles, I knew
what you were exactly.

Our brazen eyes searched
each other.

You were the boy
trailing behind me, the man
in the subway who scared me
with his hungry stare,
the teenagers I always crossed
the street to slip from memory.

I was the girl wearing
a turtleneck and loose pants
on visiting day.

We were to learn poetry.

And then

moss after wildfire.
Raspberry plants that grow in char.
Your funny, peacemaker mom
and missing window screens, no heat.

You carry a picture of your grandma
near your heart. And I knew you
suddenly and flaming.

Moving

requires stillness, more than anything, to balance life, counting forks in the cupboard. “It was strange, the way it affected me, a grown woman, to cry when I lifted the oriental rug and that thick border of dust at the edge. I had forgotten how the floor looked,”

she told the teacher, who wanted to discuss her son and the word *fuck* that flew from his mouth and hung in the air of the second grade classroom, but her mind stayed two weeks behind, on the day the U-Haul sat in the driveway, museum of boxes, and she felt it at once—she had left no mark on the world and really her life was packed towels, saved baby shoes.

“It’s only when you start labeling the cardboard that you realize you can classify. Clearly, there are separate realms for man and woman.” The vase her mother bought in Italy last winter, cans of tapioca pudding, all the books beginning with Chicken Soup. “I’m wondering if there is anything that can be done at home,” the teacher said, “I understand it’s a little unstable at the moment

with the father gone.” “I just never learned how to fill in the empty spaces,” she pulled out her cellphone. “I bought a painting the other day for the fireplace. What do you think?” she asked expectantly. “It’s nice,” the teacher offered, looking at two deer in a forest at sunset. “It’s much more my taste,” she paused, for a moment unsure, and the reds blur, brushstrokes jump, sun like fire and forest aflame.

Clock Face

XII

Where are images found?
Not the brain or even the eyes. Sometimes,
they feel like muscle memory, leaking
from my pores when I feel something
worth moving for.

I

If someone finds my letters one day,
I hope they won't believe them.
I write letters too often to please others.
I wrote one to myself for an assignment
in middle school. My teacher mailed it to me
after graduation. In it, I asked myself
if I was still *good*, as in sexless,
as if this meant I was still on track.

I worry that I'm too good.
Maybe I should skip class.
Maybe I'll become the kind of person
who writes letters for themselves.

III

What if God speaks through fortune cookies?
What a way to hide—
in things people find hard to believe,
in disbelief.

V

They say that facial expressions are universal.
Across cultures and miles of space,
people still associate a smile
with happiness. Lips curved up
like rowboats and moons
and fingernail clippings.

VIII

When I was 8, my mother stole the egg
of the goose that lived in our backyard tulip garden.
She fried it, and I ate it. The goose never returned.

X

My mother has school photos of me
beginning with Kindergarten.
They lay framed in our basement.
When I look at those photos,
I get a feeling sometimes
of who I was then,
of stretching
and reaching.

Sometimes, the gossamer outlines
of memory fade and smiles disassociate
from faces. Smiles are universal.
I'm looking at strangers.

The Things We Carry

after Laura Kasischke

I bear into this room a platter piled high with the love my mother felt toward my father. The mug of coffee on the counter each day, the peanut butter toast sliced sideways. She told her friends about his PhD. And he studied galaxies, planets circling in orbit, the inevitable collision of decomposition. This space dust would fall from his mouth at dinnertime, senseless matter that would coat the kitchen plates and seats and walls. He was used to speaking, while she would touch his elbow, brush his back lightly, each point of contact a pull of gravity. My father built constellation palaces around himself. My mother passed him lemon bars to keep cool in his study during summertime. She—

filled the gaps of air around him. She—

smiled quietly, licked at rose lipstick, tried to compete with stars.

Inheritance

If you draw a line between this bench
 then you will remember
 your grandfather's footsteps on concrete
 and from there

and that bench

the smell of Shanghai air.

You are seven, traveling overseas
 to meet him, bring him
 to the habitat
 of your guestroom.

Your grandfather sits in the house.

He doesn't like how meat is packaged here,
 the heads of fish severed off. The neighbors
 on the street too polite to speak

they cross the road.

When he walks, he doesn't see the earth
 cemented, clean. He sees

neighbors blowing smoke rings
 and the house where he plays poker
 each day at four,
 hawkers fanning fried dough
 and gravel against bare feet.
 He sees the bench

where he slipped your father gifts of stories
 that breathed in ink
 brushstroke
 calligraphy,

not the bench where you and he sit silently,
 the letters of u and s and a

between you.

Rail

In France's airport on layover, I am dazzled by bathrooms, the neon pink glow of stalls labeled women. The white, white bowls to wash hands in, which I do, with floral soap, after leaving India. Wash hands in, which I do, again.

In yoga, there is a stance called Conqueror of the Three Worlds sequence, and it is begun by the body exhaling. Bend your right leg and take hold of your big toe with your right hand. Stretch your leg as high and as close to your body as possible.

Six days ago, I jumped the India rail to Mumbai without a ticket. I walked around the Dhobi Ghat, a city of cement water bowls the size of small rooms. Hundreds of launderers rub linen raw to rub it clean. I rub at the calcified soap, hiding dirt in crevices.

Train stations hide people in transition. For a moment belonging nowhere. Six days ago, a conductor exchanged a night-train ticket to feel an 18-year-old's breasts over her shirt. She moved onto the next city. He was grandfatherly. She awoke crying.

What was love to my mother before she met my father?

in the oven, sticky buns rising, sweetening
in the heat. small bites to savor mornings before school.
stuffing shredded, salted pork and diced green onion
in pockets of hot dough, fluffy cheeks.

the chick raised by her brother to maturity,
cluster of brown orbs nested in a warm hand.
before Chinese New Year, she learned to slice
the hen's throat, watch feather and air fall.

bleeding every month onto the bench
of her school desk. the wet cloth rubbed
across wood grain, stained, at the end
of every class. as did other girls on other days.

all the times walking slowly back from the well,
bucket surface too calm to rupture. Also, when
she drank deeply from the heavy glass, brimming
without calm, the soiled, ruptured thirst.

Woman Seeking

I am the kind of person who tells you I know
Magritte. Ceci n'est pas une femme. I am instead
the wind flapping the tattered red scarf
on the playground of my childhood, indecisive
in a way you notice. Like the ocean making love
to the sand, always pulling back again. I grew up
far from music, harmony only reaching me
through television shows and radio.

At eighty-three, my grandmother's hair is obsidian,
the secret of which is buried in my cells. My body
breathes under cool sheets in the waning night.
I think you could satisfy me with lemonade tea
at odd hours and gifts wrapped in newspaper. Up close,
I am ugly. I have little dark hairs on my upper lip.
I have velvet dresses stacked in cardboard
boxes, still packed from past Christmases.

I celebrate holidays to enter the ether
of people. I will celebrate holidays with you,
meet your family, shake hands, smile
like the dolls on my nightstand,
porcelain skin until you get close—

Dear daughter,

I am writing you with ink
of burned sugar, paper sunned
with scent of me to offer some sort of passing
of breath, sharing of stain through pages.

How is your sentimental life?
Have you found it under dinner plates,
in the dark of noon with the blinds shut
and your head amid swan fluff pillows?

I wish for you to think about me first.
This is not a game of who loves who more.
These days, when I look at my mother,
I see her cells slowly dissolving into the air
around her, disappearing without permission.

How would you feel about being born in Egypt,
under stars of a new hemisphere and the hot haze
of brown earth? You would have that foreign tint
to your skin, a birthmark that tells strangers
of how much your mother loved you.

things i've owned

a set of marriage pearls, a field
in tennessee, one book missing
the last five pages, a plot, white
lilies, ink pot with calligraphy brush,
immigration papers, wet shoes, two years
of a boy's life, skin lightening cream,
a business, two cities, my mother's dress
after death, a mild case of arrhythmia,
postcards, ideals, a fish, heartache
that's not my own, virginity, lies.

Ancestry

I dug my fingers into soil
yesterday. The earth cracked
like dry knuckles. Ground
frost bitten by wind, I
split skin

and fissured veins. Yesterday,
I felt a tree's spine, peeled back
bark and found bloodline
of an older, savage folk.

And the ground exhaled
an ancient, musky scent,
the release of muffled hibernation.
I can hear the drumbeat of past exaltations.
My chest thumping hard
against land.

I suck the sap
of a wild life,
taste the sweetness
of living marrow.

My fingers dig
and tear at the roots.

Google Search: sea bass off the coast of Peru

after Leela Denver

white flesh ~~fresh~~
~~v. swimming~~ dorsal fin like a ship's rigging,
 three tiers ~~overfishing~~ plucked from water
 smelling of sea crunchy rocks that hurt feet
~~cook~~ sear
 the white bellies in lemon coats.
 let live
 on ~~square~~ ceramic plates in stomachs
 also in street markets in China where—
 my grandfather walked each morning
 —in wooden buckets of water ~~agua~~
 ~~prepared~~ alive
 they slice off the head as you watch
~~adj. fresh~~ or leave it ~~alive~~ gasping
 in a plastic bag. I carried it home ~~summer home~~
 home ~~with a Chinese address I cannot write~~
 age 8 my grandfather ~~I miss~~
 used ~~for ceviche~~ for fish cake, his recipe
 fish flapping in a plastic bag against my leg
~~placed~~ dropped it, shocked in the empty sink.
 we waited for ~~suffocation~~ silence.
 I'm waiting—

Produce

Gala apples and ruby tomatoes, the soft
underbellies of mushrooms sitting
by the bright clamor of bell peppers.
How did you get here?

It's four days after waking barren
of blood, the sheets clean. Like a scientist,
I examined the monthly packet of pills,
I furrowed the internet for solution.

And now I'm here holding the thin tube
to test my ovaries, to bear the weight
of a worried womb, yet it's still sitting
in my belly, the knot of cells in dread.

Twenty four years ago, my mother
made an appointment at a hospital.
The procedure was simple. Tissues
sucked out, the nurse showed her
the bottle of bloody liquid in the end.

I buy a red apple, bite into its tart flesh.
Suck the juice of a flower's nectar
and a bee's breath.

Things to do with your young body

Eat unwashed strawberries.
Grow up near the sea,
and salt your skin with freckles.

Enter into a love affair
with the sun. Bring it flowers
behind your ear
like a deity.

Lift your shirt
to admire
the soft sand dunes
of a storming chest.

Kiss the salt
of ocean eyes,
fall into stroke
with wavelengths.

And when you look
at the old bodies
all around, bear witness
to water evaporating, see
the hard grains of pity.

Home Alone

I know the violence of hormones,
arching fingers and curling toes,
the secret sheets we sandwich between
when your parents are gone for the weekend.
Our cartilage twists and spine gymnastics,
your kisses of hot breath wishes. In this ballet
our eyes dance too, like the spattering light
on your white walls from the car headlights
passing through. Outside,
drivers must see our nubile outlines
dense behind drawn curtains.
The child in the backseat will shriek
at the monster with four arms and feet.

In the shadow of the doorway,
our nerves intertwine. We uncoil
and rewind. Our bodies eat at each other,
like I'd imagine when I used to believe in zombies.

wild things

in late octobers, we'd dress
in black in masks of presidents,
gather candy from porches. mothers
in apricot cardigans don't smile
to see us. nervous, they reach
out bags to avoid touching
our skin. we reach in, ruffle
past chocolates, caramel creams,
little knots of sour sugar. we search
for something to sink our teeth into.

we make dirty signs at ghost costumes. we lope
around the sides of houses, lug our heavy weight
of swindled candy. we wait to see
sunrise, watch our shadows pull us
into bigger men. wild things
in rubber masks that feel
of leather, empty
eye sockets under
presidential skin.

The Hospital

One day from the other side
 of a sterile hallway, I watched
 a 50-year-old woman fluster
 like a child—*GIVE ME*

a popsicle. Bright purple hue
 on hungry lips, the neighborhood kids,
 who chased across the playground colony.
 Little people with dry mouths, wood chip
 talk, ribboned sun across our forearms.

To stake land, we'd squat in drawn borders,
 shuffle eyes at each other. The most simple warfare
 between children with angry mothers.
 We'd pass daggers—or words—in palms
 and hand them face up to the quiet kid.

This kid who, one day, sprung from a bridge
 like a bird lifting from a bush, feathers spread
 foreign, scattering color and debris. He rained
 on the concrete, rolling in a storm that drenched us
 for weeks. Afterwards, people blamed

atmospheric instability. Tropical
 Depression. But we knew the fault
 stressed until the sky cracked.

In the hospital,
 I hold a visitor's pass, my belly
 retching with purple popsicle sap.

Milk Adulterated with Melamine

The incident with the infant formula led to 6 baby deaths from kidney stones, 21 products found poisoned with an additive to make milk measure more nutritious. 11 countries ended imports from China, 2 executed, 7 government officials resigned.

Flower Food

My nose feels like sunflower when you kiss it, petals unfolding, pollen tickling the bottom of my belly with warmth. You leave for work in the morning, and my stem twist-sways in the breeze, wistful. My eyes feel heavy, dark and tender. Night shift bruises. We live dual lives, always missing each other's breathing, empty spaces of air from leaving. When I come home from work, you're in the kitchen making pancakes. I eat the hot slices, fluffy from your hands and watch my swollen shadow stretch-yawn. I spill singles from my pocket, a waitress's earning, the weight of wealth in our yearning. My—

belly rumbles and kicks, my sunflower blooming—

but how will we buy the flower food?

Once fat

Our bodies remember
the gentle sloping of skin
& etchings down thighs
like lines carved in linoleum.
Our veins versed in swollen,
the curve of bloat. We coat
ourselves in skinny.

At dinner parties, we bring
dessert and leave the plate,
so we won't wake one night
with frosting'd lips, blue
crystal sugar on fingertips.
We hunger the most in morning.
Our old selves, we shower
& sweat them away.

You show me pictures
from middle school, your
Size Large shirts since then,
your *thank god I grew out of*—
like growing out of nose bleeds
or that streak of ugly like a fever
in childhood. I tell you,
I would have liked you then,
my voice skinny again.

Oysters

I remember eight-year-old nerves. Eyes in porthole glasses staring out into a sea of faces that blurred with the beat of a thin boned pulse and smart sharp leotards in hues of hurried blushes. Eight-year-old

fear, desire smelling of hairspray
and copper medals after hours
in the gym of bare feet and promises
of picture fame wound up in ribbon hoops.
And stage paint put on for the first time before
a miniature mirror. Eight-year-old
fists and anxiety so loud
it silences but for a soft
squeak of no more. No more.
I feel sick, I hate this. I'm not ready, take me
home. Me home.
I quit, I quit.
Rhythmic

gymnastics. Eight-year-old
wonder. At a restaurant
in Minnesota where the cold outside creeps
along a warm window. My mom and I sit,
she with glass of wine and I order with my finger, a name
I can't say. I choose a plate of oysters in white wine sauce.

They lay sleepy, all tongues and open mouths
in this wood-stained room of baked bread
and perfume. My hands unsteady against cracked shellbacks.
Taste of ocean wide, salt brim, and grinding grit,
I become much more than my eight-year-old self.

Genesis

Prostrate on the ground
 is how you pray in Islam,
 and my grandmother, shallow breaths
 as she kneels down every morning.
 I peer from the stairwell, watching
 the ballet—limbs plunging,
 swan plumage. Only this time,
 when she rises, her body shudders
 as if struck, but no evidence, only skin
 and bones and white hair, knees
 fold to the ground, prostrate.

The term *heart attack*
 become greedy, survival into
 need, sixteen-year-old body
 forgetting prayer. Only this time,
 it's everywhere. From the mouth
 of the medic, is it Arabic?
 And the clock, six minutes
 passing like a shadow dance,
 lifting and pulling, a stretcher.
 So slowly I imagine the world in its creation.

Then, she is gone. Lifting off
 to her homeland. Can't stand the thought
 of dying on foreign earth. One month later,
 the voice of my grandfather through phone lines,
 split fibers and sobs of static. The story unfolds,
 how one morning, she left his arms early,
 shuffled to the window.

He awoke cold,
 followed her scent, crushed marigolds,
 and found feathers and flowers and stems,
 and out the window, song and dance.

Science

Once, a child was born with a splash of mist above his heart.
In sleep, he gasped memories of a dead man. The post-mortem report:
a shotgun blast, the torn flesh in the chest now a birthmark.

Once, a toddler spoke the name *Leila*, a girl thousands of miles away.
The child knew Leila's relatives, her favorite food, the placement of her bed in her room.
She called herself mother and constantly asked to give Leila the family jewels.

Dr. Stevenson found 3,000 children who longed for people
they had never met, who reported secrets of families they couldn't know.
He had impeccable credentials. He had a beautiful wife.

The Gentleman

Detention means rewriting *The Gentleman*, a passage we copy into notebooks as punishment, over and over again. The words mother uses for her boss but not father. The words sound the same as working late, as new dress, as secret date.

It's a bad idea to be tall at urinals. Shorter boys will cage in from behind, pee between gates of legs, gangly teenage bravado to bait belly laughs, the taller boys trapped, this communal exhaling of piss and nerves and body.

We learn lessons about friendship in history class. Young Stalin with his flop of dark hair movie stars imitate. Mussolini, the uglier one, eyes always a little too round for the proper glare. Juvenile mistake, he didn't focus enough on personal branding.

When I meet a girl someday, I will tell her I only date on Tuesdays for I know luxury goods mismatch in supply and demand. Darling, I will run to your house with bare feet and exclamations! I will give you the most tremendous Tuesdays.

Repeat a phrase enough to make a spell. Chant *make me like Mike* on the basketball court, chant gentleman when I'm grown, chant mother, and she won't leave. Chant mother, and she'll come home.

Fairy Tale

each time we kiss, we save
 a fairy, my husband told me
 as we wed near the pine trees
 between our backyards. a quiet ceremony
 in summer with his sisters, his dog, and later,
 tucked in shade under the deck,
 our quick lips like eyelashes blinking,
 we saved many fairies at age five.

some cynical boyfriend told me later
 about routine, evolution, residual
 habit. a process used by mothers to feed
 children, passing chewed nourishment
 as penguins do leaning over, necks bowed
 like the curve of a violin's body, taut
 in strain, appreciation. all beaks
 in angles and sound.

somewhere in between
 kissing: technique taught
 behind small hands into burning ears,
 pausing at the doorstep, sticky.
 it was sacrament and sugar
 in the morning, before leaving,
 a quiet mark brimming under lips,
 breaking into bloom.

and you,
 in summer sunlight
 under pines grown tall
 and unruly. here,
 I find your mouth.

The Traveler's Diary

I sing a hymn of happy like sunshine
kisses on my nose in a holy place, a land of temples and candlelight
prayers every evening. My hymen broke like the clouds over the Taj Mahal
four hours before dawn break, morning sun filtering through marble like silk.
Ninety five degrees and sticky like melting sugar cubes,
lips red as watermelon, taste sweet as mango, kissing
for real now, kissing hard and pressing hands
on backs and hands on me, me, me
my body arches to sing. Beauty I am here
and beauty I see. Unspeakable
wonder before me. Love of a king
wrought in living stone. Love
of a boy wrung in living me.

Yakutsk

In the world's coldest city,
figures walk out of air
like watery cream, these aliens
cloaked in fur hood and lining.

Fog and breath cling to all light,
bubbles swallow the dewey sun
in white, shy spaces.

Reentry

When you lose a tooth,
your tongue will drift fixedly
along the sudden bumpy cavern,
the tender, iron taste of membrane.

Like some irreparable itch,
you explore terrain of newly foreign
mouth, touch now then again, flicking
hard to find signs of some new tooth.

Emerging, you hope,
at last from the dark, soft walls
which held you tightly
and gently.

When others see you, they might wonder
what has changed in five years.

Only you will swirl your breath
and heat in the inner cavity
of brain and body, knowing.

The Optometrist

Slivers of a fish's spinal cord.
Maps and spectrum graphs.
The body inside out and pulsing.

Your eyes on the other side of cold
metal dials as I read the scramble
of alphabet.

The air is heavy. I hear
your breath. This morning
blackbirds gathered
on budding stems of tall trees
silently.

In the waiting room, my mother holds
my hand, guilty because
8 years of girl can't choose
the frames she wants
with such thick lenses.

Carpet is grains of red, white, black
and quartz. The steady stretching
of corneas, and a blind uncle
who couldn't finish college.

Fourth grade

diorama due tomorrow.
spent the day making clay ladybugs
in a blue papered shoebox.

on the bus home,
sat three to a seat with friends,
eating peanut butter sticks.

sudden panic that evening
of losing the box along the way,
scattering static at father.

we drove to school
in the dark, but the doors
were locked.
in the backseat, I fell
asleep, dreaming.

my father bought clay.
we rolled red and black balls,
cutting green crinkle paper habitats
into the gray of night. laughing,
as we molded bug children,
our hands somehow
changing, fluttering
away.

Song

I was trying to play piano
when I was suddenly playing you
in and out of tune, and I realized
this isn't working anymore.

Five days ago, I laughed a horse
laugh in the still air of a fancy restaurant,
the kind with flavored butter.
You pinched my arm to quiet me.

Next week, I'll fry the egg again.
I'll say to you on the phone,
be home soon after work.

By then, I'll be at the train window
watching the humming trees
and listening again, for birdsong.

Furniture-less

in the new house
of paint we picked ourselves,
marbled counters and new wealth.
we told the moving man an address
thick enough to hold all numbers,
a blank space behind the street.
we owned, a square. we bobbed
our heads into rooms, finding
places to fit our triangle lives,
the wobbly kitchen table, chipped
dishes, our dog. settling on new.

night falls and we arrange ourselves
inside like starlings pausing in pairs.
listening to the stop start hum
of air conditioning and recording
our voices on the answering machine.
we eat old pizza and thumb through
dusty tapes, the box of movies
that made it here before us. we watch
The Land Before Time on our backs
dangling cheese in our mouths
in the room that reminds us most
of us in our old home.

The New Yorker, pg. 48

One day, I found myself counting
 jam jars in the closet. It was then I knew
 I had to leave. With spoons of honey, I grew
 accustomed to this life. The way mushrooms
 start eating meat and then can't retreat,
 must advance to cannibalism.

The mahogany furniture, moonlight
 about fine plates and painting frames
 captured my imagination. My husband, the children,
 all dust falling into patterns, flying off skin.
 Around the house, I couldn't scrub it out.
 It lay like sleeping powder.

And so I proceeded with goodbyes.
 There was confusion, saved baby teeth, the damn
 jam my mother taught me to can last summer.
 My littlest one asked how to braid her hair. I laughed.
 Oh the glee! I left my prized vacuum,
 the skillet, slippers, my husband's law degree!

Out past the lawn, past the gate, my body
 exhaled need, rising like steam at midnight.
 I'm trying. *She met the interviewer's gaze,*
 Is that enough testimony? *He had polished shoes,*
clean nails. I'm trying to be happy.

Migration

Our heartbeats started off
together, the way geese flutter
in a V. The ones behind beat wings
the same path as the lead, receive
uplifts of air.

act I

When my mom arrived a year after him,
my dad brought her home from the airport.
She opened the fridge in his college issued
apartment for employees. It was empty.
He held up a coupon, two for one deal.
They drove to Burger King
and for the first time in her life,
she tasted America.

act II

Three years into piano lessons,
I caught on. My bus arrived home
thirty minutes before my parents.
I spent that space crouched before the TV
watching cartoons with a bowl of ramen.
When I heard the groan of the garage door,
I'd sprint to the black bench and play
scattered notes, my mother catching
just the end of practice.

act III

She was never one to send gray boxes
in heavy tape. Those care packages brought
joy to girls at sleepaway camp. Sweets,
cheese in a can with wrapped salami, salt
along my mouth as I watched them eat it all,
packed into teeth like our car after a trip
to the Chinese grocery, trunk of bok choy,
bean skin, dark bottles of soy, loose tea.

act IV

Forty minutes out of the way in the rain
for some college conference I didn't need

so I grew slit-eyed. She drove silent under the clouds
as we drowned in the patter of water on windshield
until her words, smooth as a river pebble.

Ungrateful. I slid through the car door
and walked away quickly. I left her in the lot,
lost her in the people with the tendency
to stampede, the voices of white parents
fortune-telling, my fowl heart vibrating.

Current

New Orleans spring swimming current down
to the mouth of the Gulf. Tongue compass
and crawfish hunger, tasty. In a novelty shop,
creole colorful beads tremble from the constant pound,

pound,
parade.

The ground shakes.
I crave stripping
down crab flesh, the pink freckled blooms,
skin slap red raw and feeling.

I dress for my mother's headshake,
her jumping heart. Years under curfew
and my throat is parched.

The tongue

down

my throat

tastes like strawberry ice cream.

The cones I would lick after school until the melt
would drip down my shirt and sneak into my skirt.

Unbuttoned,

her hands hot against mine. When I was little, it was all-beautiful, Mardi Gras pretty.
She's beautiful, her lips red as a cherry, her tongue of boysenberry. My mother
calls me sin, but my grin makes the strings

snap

and spin.

Mail

My head on your stomach, I feel
the blood that feeds your body,
rumble of sugar galloping
through your veins. All we ate
for dinner was ice cream.
You read a letter, paper tipped
as if to spill the words
on your face. I hear the pull
of your sleeve on pages.
I want to be those ink ridges
your thumb caresses. I want
to be entangled in the nerves
of your loose limbs, every taste
a taste of me, every sigh from
my breathing. As you fall asleep
at night, the words of me
dripping into your dreams.

I feel your belly jostle
in laughter. Isn't she
funny? You show me
her hand. I shake,
shake and shake.

Zenith

On the spring equinox,
we balance raw eggs
on their heads

Measure height to lines
rubbed with lead in the kitchen,
waiting for gravity to unfasten

For when day length equals night,
we are reminded of the sun
somewhere perfectly above us
in suspension, orb all equal
and opposite reactions

And we can endure
anything until sunset
when we will climb into bed
and wait for space to claim us.

And in that space between sleep and wakefulness

she didn't remember the boy she loved for two years,
the pizzas they'd split after school, snatching hot slices
the way she'd later bite into the hearts of other boys,
moaning afterwards about overeating and pain.

her father standing on a chair, catching bugs
under the buzzing deck light at the onset of night.
their dim wings slowed by the smell of acetone in a cup,
she pinned their bodies to a shoebox for science class.

the dead crow at the foot of a bleached tree trunk
on her way to english at a college far away. its eyes open,
all white. its feathers inky as blue shadows, almost fake.
in the frigid air, she stalled, unsure where to walk.

This is what she remembered.

water. running in streams suddenly from an open mouth
sky, licking at skin up to her ankles. wading through warmth
of an indian monsoon, vaguely knowing directions to shelter.
strangers staring at her foreign color, shade and hue, new again.

Mountain Climbers

I

Like flightless penguins, we struggle
and flap our stunted wings as we scale
the cliffs. We stretch out our necks,
our beady eyes stare at the ocean spray
seventy feet below. We feel no fear.
We pull at our ligaments, shake out
our feathers. Perched at the edge,
we look for the courage to jump.

II

Mountains have magnet centers.
The force weighs legs heavy,
shaking joints with its polarity.
Only at the top does it repel,
pushing you into sky. And then
you cling to ground for fear
of flying with no safety line.

III

A thread of dark separates sea from sky
and I sit on a throne of burnt rock.
Beneath these hard ledges and jagged needles,
a boy in a yellow raincoat walks on water,
scaling black mossy steps hovering
above white froth. Queen of these cliffs,
I conduct wind and wave from shoreline.
My hands outreached, feet curled to stay
steady while the boy plays tag below me.

IV

My body feels warm as this rock,
my blood like a salamander's, slick
to run through me and loud in my ears.
I press my cheek to mountain ridges.
This peak so wise its skin's sun spotted,
evergreen growing from its teeth.
I can hear its hollow rumbling
as the fog rolls in. I can feel it shiver.
I perch on the forehead, see what it sees,

feel its cool, hard peace.
I swear I hear a heartbeat.

V

When I was young, I'd run rocks
under water to see their secrets.
Their red veins would burn through
dust coatings; black swirls and white
filaments. I'd rub the water into
their membrane, asking beauty
to stay. But these rocks don't need
my prayers. They show their slices
like the rings around a tree. Sharp
as a scream, they rumble above rapids
and jostle one another. Bathed
in salt splashes, their markings
bear times of drought and plenty,
the yearly migration of birds.
Crack open their copper skin
and underneath, find poetry.

Mahalo

5,000 orchids fall from a helicopter onto Hilo, Hawaii
on May 4th. Paid for by Disney to celebrate their new cruise line.

I am still rubbing dandelions under my chin,
when no one is looking, to see if I've fallen in love.

Yellow is the color of desire. The crushed pollen
under the heat of my skin. The yellow wallpaper
of your living room as we stare at the TV,
pinkie fingers dangling dangerously close

together. A boy told me once,
we are meant for each other. You are scorpio
and I am cancer, both shelled creatures
that claw at sand. You on land
and I in water.

Floating, I peer at the fish below,
breathing through my mouth a hollow sound.
All I feel is the scrape on my knee
from rubbing cells with coral.
I'm afraid the coral will die now.

The word for white people here is haole,
pronounced like a laugh then oh! and lei.
It means no breath. When we greet a close friend,
we put our foreheads together and open our mouths.
We breathe each other's air, the sound of waves.