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While it's Still Morning

Cosenza Marie Hendrickson

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

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ABSTRACT

While it's Still Morning

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While It's Still Morning is a collection of lyric poems exploring themes of love, gratitude, and praise. The critical essay introducing the collection discusses possible pitfalls of this genre of poetry and how I've sought to avoid them. It also details qualities often present in my favorite poems (surprise, particularity, strangeness, tension, attention, allusion) and ways in which I've striven to create these qualities in my own poetry.

Keywords: creative writing, poetic theory, lyric poetry, praise poetry, love poetry

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In my study of poetry the past few years, one truth I've learned is that no poet (and I might say no human) has ever accomplished anything of worth without the help, guidance, wisdom, and strength of others. Though an acknowledgements page is hardly enough space for expressing my indebtedness and my gratitude, I offer my thanks.

First, to the gentle yet ambitious Michael Lavers, who has not only been the best thesis chair anyone could ask for but has also taught me what it is to have the soul of a poet. His thoughtful feedback, encouraging words, and countless hours of labor helping me to complete this work were instrumental to my success.

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Finally, my love and gratitude to the people backstage without whom I would have crumbled long ago: to my father for being so excited about my poetry that he bought me a 1600-page dictionary of poetry and poetics and flew from Hawaii to Utah just to attend my defense; to my mother and sisters who read my poems, listened to my woes, and still believed in me; and to the incredible friends I've made during my time in this program who have shared my passions, cheered me on, helped me get published, inspired my writing, and made every tear worth it.

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INTRODUCTION

In “East Coker,” T.S. Eliot describes poetry as “a raid on the inarticulate / With shabby equipment always deteriorating” (lines 179-80). I have run up against this problem again and again. If it is difficult to express myself in my poetry, I fear it will be even harder to explain the aims and methods of my poetry in prose, but to steal another phrase from Eliot, “For us, there is only the trying. The rest is not our business” (“East Coker” line 189).

When deciding on a theme for this collection, I wanted to write about something I was already writing about rather than imposing a theme on myself which I might not find inspiring. It turned out I was writing a lot of love poems, some good, many bad. At this same time, I was reading Dante Alighieri’s *Divine Comedy*, perhaps the most ambitious love poem ever written. I had always been slightly embarrassed by the fact that I felt drawn to writing love poems, but as I read the *Divine Comedy* I saw how unabashed Dante is in proclaiming the romantic inspiration for this epic poem, boldly stating “I am one who, when Love / inspires me, takes careful note and then, / gives form to what he dictates in my heart” (Musa 24.52-54). Though the *Divine Comedy* seeks to create a cosmology and breathe life into the great figures of history (a sufficiently epic aim) Dante never lets his reader forget that this poem is first and foremost a love poem to Beatrice. I decided that if love was a sufficiently noble theme for Dante, it was certainly a good enough theme for me.

I knew, however, that choosing this theme would present its share of perils. Rilke, in his *Letters to a Young Poet*, cautions: “Do not write love-poems; avoid at first those forms that are too facile and commonplace: they are the most difficult, for it takes a great, fully matured power to give something of your own where good and even excellent traditions come to mind in quantity” (Rilke 16). Not only is it difficult to say anything new about such a universal subject,

but it also runs the risk of coming off banal or maudlin. I wanted to follow the injunction that Rilke gives directly after the above caution, to “seek those [themes] which your own everyday life offers you; describe your sorrows and desires...with loving, quiet, humble sincerity, and use, to express yourself, the things in your environment” (Rilke 16-17). I have seen firsthand, as a creative writing instructor, the pitfalls of trying to write in a universal way about universal experiences. Many of my students want to write about “friendship” or “family” or “nature” without looking to the strange, specific details of their own experience. These poems always fall flat. Maybe Rilke is right and I shouldn’t be writing “love-poems” at all; but I’ve tried to avoid the danger he warns of by leaning into his injunction of drawing on the particularities of my own life to add specificity, oddity, and a sense of new-ness and vibrancy.

As I’ve worked on these poems, I discovered that I didn’t just want to write love poetry, I wanted to write poetry that portrayed love with honesty. For me, this meant writing about different types of love. In this collection I’ve written love poems for a romantic partner, for God, for the world, for poetry and poets, even for myself. Sometimes these loves conflict with each other, such as in “My Pagan Inclinations Visit the Egypt Exhibit” and “Psalm,” in which love for a person creates tension with the speaker’s feelings toward deity, or in “Elegy” where the speaker’s self-love and natural inclinations conflict with her love for her romantic partner. I think that some form of tension is necessary both in portraying love accurately and in creating a poem that effectively captures and retains a reader’s imagination and investment. This tension doesn’t have to come from the subject matter, it can also come in the form of the tension between the reader’s expectations and unexpected moves that the poet makes, or in tension created through use of a form where the poet has to balance meaning with rhyme and rhythm. Poems that ask the reader to grapple with some sort of tension (created either through subject matter or form) allow

the reader to engage more fully with the poem and thus leave a greater impression on the reader. There may be good love poems that don't have any tension, but I think generally poems that feel too "easy" are not memorable.

I am also interested in the many phases of love and the conflict inherent in even the happiest of relationships. "A Day Off," for example, deals with the fear and frustration of an unhealthy, deteriorating romance, while "The Library" attempts to convey the pain of losing a beloved and a (probably futile) attempt to come to terms with the loss. Other poems, like this untitled one, strive to portray the realities of good relationships:

last night, for instance,
we were hurting each other
at the end of a perfect day,
under the floodlights that loomed over us, their brightness cold
and hollow as an empty theater.

Time does not heal anything.
Only gods can do that.
But God told us we are gods:
our fingers,
our lips,
our singing softly on the drive home.

I wrote this poem hoping to portray with honesty the everyday upsets and repairing of upsets that happens in healthy relationships, the "jostling...in and out of...love" that occurs constantly even with the happiest couples. I also wanted to portray this tension and reconciliation not just through the denotations of the words, but through their sounds as well. To do this I used emptier, echo-y sounds in the first stanza ("loomed," "cold," "hollow,") and gentler, almost shushing sounds in the second ("fingers," "lips," "singing softly").

In "The house is warm tonight. I miss you—" I explore the externally imposed tension in a relationship that comes from being apart from a loved one. In this poem, the speaker states "I

can't stand turbulence," reflecting on an uncomfortable plane ride and also on the metaphorical turbulence of emotions that she is experiencing as she misses the presence of her beloved. In this poem I tried to keep the hints of "turbulence" to a minimum to signal that nothing has really gone wrong between the "I" and "you" of the poem, but rather that this is a reflection on a mundane and ultimately insignificant unhappiness that everyone in love experiences. Instead of lingering on descriptions of tension, I use the very compressed sonnet structure of the poem to create an external tension that mirrors the external tension experienced by the characters in the poem.

Seamus Heaney makes a similar (though not identical) move in his poem "The Skunk" in which he focuses mainly on images outside the relationship and gives only a small, unexplained hint at tension when he says, "After eleven years I was composing / Love-letters again, broaching the word "Wife" / Like a stored cask" before returning to his descriptions of a skunk stalking the California night (lines 9-11). Heaney also uses form to create hints of tension in this poem, by restricting himself to precise, tight, four-line stanzas. Using this form forces Heaney to constrain his thoughts and wrap them into a tight package that can fit his stanza length, which creates a tension between all that there is to say about his subject and what he actually can say in the space of each stanza. Sometimes I think just letting a hint of the imperfections of life into a poem is enough to counter what might otherwise become too sappy, and sometimes the form rather than the words can provide this sense of tension.

However, while I believe that portraying turbulence is one important part of writing about love honestly, there are also moments of unmixed joy that I've tried to capture as well. In a poem drawing on a joyful scripture from the book of Isaiah, I listed everyday things that I am grateful will keep happening: "There will be lunchtimes, there will be first-snows / there will be blue egg

shards under trees in Aprils” (“Reminder for Days When I Cry in the Car” lines 1-2). In another poem I celebrate the vibrancy of a marketplace in Sicily, again using a list form in order to convey a sense of abundance and overflow of goodness: “watermelons like cool moons / brined olives splashed from tubs / bergamots, grapefruits, pomelos, capers, / reek of oysters, gore of blood oranges” (“In a Market in Palermo” lines 1-4). Although the ending of this poem turns to thoughts of the speaker’s mortality, I aimed for a tone that defies the inevitability of death while surrounded with the riotous life of this market. This type of rejoicing in the face of mortality or despair is something I greatly admire in Eastern European poets such as Czeslaw Milosz, Adam Zagajewski, and Zbigniew Herbert.

However, poems of unmixed joy can tend to slide into cliché and triteness and it’s sometimes been difficult to find a middle ground where the emotions of the poem are positive but not saccharine. In an attempt to avoid cliché, I often resort to slight weirdness in my poetry (I do consider weirdness in poems a virtue most of the time). I do this several times in my poem “Ars Mundi” which is a contemplation of the purpose of poetry in the form of an imagined conversation with many of the poets I look up to. Many other poets have written this sort of poem before me, from Dante to Seamus Heaney, and I therefore worried that approaching this poem with a tone of pure earnestness would sound cliché. In order to off-set some of the perhaps over-used elements of the poem (big thoughts about the purpose of poetry, conversations with dead masters, etc.) I added some weird details, like the mention of Winnemucca, or the opening line explaining that what follows is a sugar-addled dream. In “Lifting Prayer” I try to counter triteness with phrases like “Diet Coke problem” and “jelly sandwiches.” In “July Evening,” a hopeful love poem, I mention children by the sidewalk selling lemonade while dressed in bear

costumes, a bizarre detail that not only adds some levity and strangeness but also creates a fresh scene in which a more worn-out drama can take place.

I've come to realize that although there may be more pitfalls in love poetry than in other types of poems, the things that make a great love poem are also the things that make a good poem on any subject. But what are those things? I often notice that good poetry pays careful attention to detail, and in so doing, reopens a reader's eyes to the beauty or horror or strangeness of the world. Milosz is one of my greatest examples in this kind of careful attention to detail. In one of my favorite of his poems he describes a simple blacksmith shop, a subject which would likely go unnoticed by most. After describing the scene in detail, Milosz reflects, "It seems I was called for this: / To glorify things just because they are" ("Blacksmith Shop" lines 13-14). These lines resonate with what I hope to achieve as a poet. I don't feel the need to try to sway politics or prophesy the future with my poetry (I'll leave that to Percy Shelley), but I do hope that my poetry reminds people of the divinity, the glory, all around them. I hope that it in some way helps my readers to connect with the divine.

To accomplish this, I often look to the Eastern European poetic tradition to find inspiration. Poets like Milosz, Herbert, and Zagajewski astound me with their ability to witness political upheavals, wars, and other horrors, while maintaining a certain hopefulness and gratitude for beauty. At times it feels like there is a lot of sad, cynical, lamenting poetry being written and while I acknowledge the need to express these emotions, I also believe that the world is in need of joyful poems that remind us that life isn't all bad. One of Zagajewski's poems beautifully expresses this when he says, "Try to praise the mutilated world" ("Try to Praise the Mutilated World" line 1). We can acknowledge that the world is mutilated but still choose to look for hope and beauty among the ruins. Poetry that expresses gratitude and praise, that

celebrates the good and beautiful, helps us to remember and connect with the divine source of all beauty and goodness.

Waking people up to the world, jostling them into awareness, is something else that I believe good poems do. One of the poets I admire for her ability to re-frame the way we view the world through the surprising specificity of her poetry is Elizabeth Bishop. For example, in her poem “The Fish,” Bishop scrutinizes a fish she’s caught, describing every inch of it from its “brown skin...like ancient wallpaper” to his “irises backed and packed / with tarnished tinfoil / seen through the lenses / of old scratched isinglass” (lines 10-11, 37-40). I can never see a fish without thinking about isinglass eyes now; Bishop’s imagery has changed the way I experience reality. I’ve attempted to use similar surprising specificity as I write my own poems. For example, in “Elegy” rather than simply talking about the speaker being in a garden she describes herself as burying her hands under pea plants, and in “On Eternity” I originally was going to just say “egrets pose” but decided that I wanted to get as specific as possible and name a certain variety, thus “cattle egrets.”

In order to give people hope, or joy, or pleasure through my poetry I think a lot about how to evoke feelings through words. I think of emotions as phenomena which occur both within the mind and the body and I want my poetry to resonate with people both intellectually and physically. One of my favorite poets of all time, Gerard Manley Hopkins, is a master of creating a very physical experience. Hopkins’s syntax, rhythms, and sound combine to create poems that not only conjure beautiful images, but that feel amazing in the mouth as you read them. His verse is so dense that at times it feels as if the words are actually pushing back against your body. He also uses exclamations that seem to indicate a bodily reaction from the speaker of the poem, such

as in “God’s Grandeur” where Hopkins ends the poem “Because the Holy Ghost over the bent / World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings” (lines 13-14).

Most of the poems in my thesis are much lighter, however, Hopkins’s example has made me very aware of the “mouthfeel” of a poem. I hope to highlight the beauty of the world not just through beautiful images but through beautiful sounds, rhythms, and textures. In “The house is warm tonight. I miss you—” I use the word “clattering” at the beginning of a should-be iambic line because the rapid dactylic rhythm not only feels jostling against the expected iambic rhythm, but also because the word trips off the tongue in a pleasurable way. “In a Market in Palermo” opens with the line “watermelons like cool moons” where the repetition of the gentle “m” and “l” sounds combined with the repeated “oo” of “cool moons” feel soothing and soft in the mouth.

Another very different but equally powerful way to evoke emotion that I’ve tried to implement in this collection is that of “stealing” from poetic ancestors or simply from other texts. T. S. Eliot is a great example of this technique, and I’ve tried to emulate his example in many of the poems in my thesis. I’ve come to appreciate the sonorous resonance that is imparted to a poem when it borrows from an earlier source. This type of borrowing shows up in many different ways in my poetry. Sometimes, I will admit, I “patch up” my poems with fragments or ideas from works I admire. For example, “A Day Off” started out as a vastly different first draft which was doing far too much obvious telling and not enough “telling it slant” as Dickinson says. In order to increase the sense of mystery in the poem, and to help it feel more dreamlike I decided to borrow a bit from Eliot himself. So the opening image in “A Day Off” became “In the darkness of God she stands backlit,” with the phrase “the darkness of God” being a borrowing from Eliot’s “East Coker” (line 113), then a few lines later I almost directly quote Eliot: “Humankind can’t take much reality” (“Burnt Norton” lines 42-43). Since *Four Quartets* is a

work that I admire for its strangeness and ageless resonance I hoped that stealing from it would impart some of that same feeling to my own poetry. I realize that such loud allusions are a risky move, especially when brought from a poem with huge philosophical and theological import into a poem focused on more mundane questions. In “A Day Off,” I hope that the allusions, especially the second, create an opening into the thought patterns and character of the subject of the poem—an artistic and literary-minded woman who is trying to rationalize an abusive relationship, twisting literary references in an attempt to anesthetize herself.

I also steal from an older text (the King James Bible) in “Psalm” and I do so in a few different ways. The premise of the poem itself is that it draws on striking images from the twenty-third psalm in the Old Testament, then each of those images is the catalyst for a reflection on the speaker’s own life—the phrase “still waters” from the psalm becomes the heading of a section that meditates on an experience of walking by a river, etc. Although most of the poem does not draw closely on the subject matter of the psalm, the words of that passage are a catalyst for my poem. However, there are a few moments when I draw more directly on both scriptural language and ideas. In the section “Valley of Shadow” the speaker meets God, and God says, “*Let there be death*”—hearkening back to the language of the creation story in Genesis. Anyone familiar with the KJV will hear the allusion, however the word “death” is unexpected and has almost antithetical connotations to the original word “light.” I again draw on scripture at the end of the poem though this time in a slightly more subtle manner when the speaker says, “And in the morning / I slip out of bed and beg God to keep the door / of his house shut, and of mine open.” This idea contrasts with the idea found at the end of the twenty-third psalm “surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever” (*KJV* Psalm 23:6). In using scriptural allusions, I hope to bring the resonance of an

ancient, world-shaping text into my own poetry, and in creating slight subversions to that text I hope to indicate a certain complexity in the speaker's relationship with God. The subversions are meant to indicate that the speaker has a basis of spiritual knowledge but is not constricted by others' thoughts on spirituality.

In other poems the allusions are more formal and metrical than they are linguistic or ideological. "The house is warm tonight. I miss you—" is a good example of this type of metrical allusion. I decided to write this poem as a sonnet (admittedly an unrhymed one) in order to tap into the long tradition of love poetry written in this form. I think part of the merit of writing this poem as a sonnet was that the form could speak to the theme, which then let me spend most of my words on things outside of the love relationship, while still keeping clear in the reader's mind that the relationship is the heart of the poem. I also, accidentally or subconsciously, mimic the rhythm of the opening line of Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach" (also a poem about love and loneliness) in the first sentence of this poem. "I Don't Have an Alibi" mimics the long, skinny poems in Ross Gay's *Catalogue of Unabashed Gratitude*. Although the subject is more somber than many of his poems, the form lends itself to a poem of tumbling thoughts, whether those thoughts be effusive and joyful or spiraling and somber. "Holding your hand—" does not follow the syllabic formula of a haiku, but its miniscule, three-line structure is reminiscent of haiku poems. I thought this form was fitting for a brief, simple moment with both beauty and a sort of grounding humor to it. I recently read Paul Fussell's *Poetic Meter and Poetic Form* which made me much more aware of the power that a form has to convey meaning, whether it be the tradition of a fixed form or the line-length, metrical lilt, and rhyme scheme of both fixed and nonce forms. Although there isn't much "formal" poetry in this collection, writing with form is something that I hope to explore further as I continue to write poetry.

Some might question the originality of stealing, but as John Talbot has told me multiple times, the word “original” in some senses means “novel” but in another sense can be understood as “returning to the origin.” I believe that almost all great poets strive for originality in both senses. For example, Dante and John Milton borrow heavily from the *Aeneid*’s structure and themes but add their own theological reflections, different poetic form, and rich images, conversations, and characters which are brought to life by their own imaginations. This mixture of borrowing and invention results in something that while paying homage to past masters is also completely new and alive in its own right. Eliot does likewise in “The Waste Land,” *Four Quartets*, etc. Robert Frost, Louise Glück, Seamus Heaney, Mark Strand, and many more of my favorite poets are unafraid to look to their poetic ancestors and capture the resonance of the ages through their work. It is absolutely essential that I surround myself with and learn from the voices of the masters who have written before me.

Those are some things that I know about this collection. But there are many questions that I still have about poetry in general, about my poetry specifically, about myself as a poet. One of these big questions is, why do I write poetry? When I began my master’s program, I had high hopes of one day winning the Nobel Prize, but on the November morning that I type this, that aspiration feels somehow uninspiring. In his “Defense of Poetry,” Percy Shelley describes the poet as “a nightingale, who sits in darkness and sings to cheer its own solitude” (Shelley 876). I like this image because it implies that poetry is something we write in order to grapple with our own feelings and try to make sense of the world, rather than something motivated by a desire for recognition. Even Donald Hall, who urges poets to seek greatness in his essay “Poetry and Ambition” cautions that “small achievement” and “petty egoism” is the ambition “to win the Pulitzer or the Nobel....The grander goal is to be as good as Dante” (Hall 299). Over the course

of my master's program I've felt my poetic ambition shift away from the desire for publication and recognition. At the same time my awareness of my inadequacies as a poet has grown and my ambitions are now more centered around perfecting the areas in which I am currently underdeveloped as a poet.

Another question that I've been pondering lately is why I prefer to write poetry over other genres. One of the things I love about poetry is how many different tools you have to create meaning. When writing fiction, the connotations and denotations of words are the main meaning-makers available. In poetry, however, sound, line length, line breaks, rhyme, rhythm, form, repetition, punctuation, and the look of the poem on the page are all means of conveying meaning. These means of conveying meaning are more physical than intellectual (they are actual visual or auditory stimuli) and they communicate to the body as well as the mind. Because emotions occur as physical sensations in the body, poetry seems to me the right medium for evoking love, joy, loneliness, exhilaration, and the other emotions that I've sought to explore in this collection. For me, the value of poetry (and of art in general) comes from its ability to help us connect with our humanity in a more present and mindful way than we often do in our day-to-day lives. If a poem can make me shiver or smile or think deeply, I believe it has justified itself by helping me to remember that I am a human being, experiencing joy and fear and wonder like billions of other humans.

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Psalm

Still Waters

In October we walked
to where the river pools.
You stooped, scooped stones
to skip, sent them skating out,
leaving dimples on the reedy
glass. Once I saw a muskrat there—
cooling his paws as he paddled,
like an old man, unperturbed. I think
I would like to live like that—
trawling the deep green—
not needing to believe—
in us—
in anything.

The Paths

We took the trail to Stewart Falls,
your blond head bobbing
in front, behind, never
beside me, two days after
we postponed the wedding
that I knew would never happen.
The water tumbled down the rock face
with nothing to grasp,
no hands to grasp with.

Valley of Shadow

I met God in the valley.
He sat on a log
across the path,
I wore my yellow windbreaker.
He held a lifeless bird
in his cupped palm—
blue-feathered.
God said,
Let there be death.
And there was warm, sweet death
like a good bed
with flannel covers
and we both saw that death was good.
But he handed me the bird
and bade me walk.

Rod and Staff

There is only one house
on that cold outcrop
and I climbed, walking
stick in hand.

I let tree branches snap
across my face. This was my burden.

I lost count of the sheep bones
growing like lewd coral
from the ground.

Somewhere in the world
someone switched a light on.

And there was light.

Green

Your favorite color, I believe—
or was it blue? Darling,

I'm glad she wraps her thin arms
around you and kisses your eyebrows.

You get to live with the pain
of being hurt. I must live with the pain
of hurting. Remember the pines

at the edge of the frozen lake,
tomato soup in a thermos,

and cumbersome snowshoes?

The House

Some nights I dream a house
to live in, but you are not there.

I gave the key to someone with dark hair,
someone who knows how to switch the lights on
when I trip the circuit breaker.

At night we breathe "how magnificent you are"
and we don't know what we mean

but we mean it. And in the morning

I slip out of bed and beg God to keep the door
of his house shut, and of my house open.

A Day Off

In the darkness of God she stands backlit,
scrubbing the table, thinking of his red car
streaking like a drunk teen. Simile.
Humankind can't take much reality.
This morning he left work early,
squeezed her shoulder on the way out,
told her he was heading up to Strawberry,
Whooped!
Maybe he's a real peach, she thinks,
imagining the cool-whip clouds over
the reservoir. Maybe we can do in the dark
what day forbids us.
Maybe he's fiddling now with the fly
she saw him meticulously wrap last night,
the yellow work of a silkworm binding
a trout's undoing. She thinks
she will have to wear socks to bed tonight.
Maybe after a while she'll get warm.
Maybe tomorrow she will find the dance
that can ride the ripples of his cursing—
Lord, have mercy on us.

You Had a Name

You said you loved me, you should have stayed with me.

The very brink of autumn; whistling men boarding a propeller plane.
Whispers, because the air is full, golden.

When I fell asleep, I dreamed that we were talking.
Seems like such a long time ago—

I remember sounds that hurt me now,
your voice low and aching in a blue pickup, saying that I saved you,
something like that.

San Diego. The slatted shade of palm fronds.
Bronze girls fluttering in wide, white sleeves.
On the pavement, an old man smiles into the wind,
perhaps remembering a woman from a bar.

Tactless
sounds or gestures
like cold rain seeping down the spine,

but I am still parched, desperate.

Headlights at the corner. Our baby
kicking an almost-rhythm against your shoulder—

if I remember correctly, this
is just how it happened, that evening,
whole, shining, without a trace of dust
stuck in its crevices, so I awoke elated, and reached over
searching for warmth—

under a beech tree, mismatched turf, cold bronze
with your name on it, gleaming.

I Don't Have an Alibi

I don't have an alibi
I *was*
there that night
in my high heels
unbuttoning
the top button of your shirt
fooling you with black
dress and lashes
fooling you into forgetting
our separateness
that we are like the sun
and ocean
never touching
in our apparent touching
for that night
for that week
all we needed were lips
and the cadence of whispers
but you stopped
reaching for my back
when I leaned
forward to watch
the Avalanche
power play
your eyes skated
from my face too soon
you held my hand
in one of yours
not two
and we were not
a black-clad
double act in masks
but two shucked mollusks
soft defenseless
I cannot blame you
looking for a place to hide
it's okay
no need for an alibi
I plead guilty
to the crime of smothering reason
to the capital crime of reckless
hope.

The Library

Rendezvousing, snafu-ing, late to class,
at the computer desks, writing:
you (in your hideous flipflops)

and me with eyes like bumblebees
drifting toward your flower hands
or grass hands, stirring in the wind

of your linear thinking. *It is not the body
that finds love.* Not the hands nor the brain either,
but something like love wrote itself across your screen.

Tonight, I've returned like a dog prowling the desert,
retracing the path, scenting your cologne.
The ghosts of our rustlings die in that room—

rows of shelves, lacquer-chipped desks, old maps, old books—

Snowsong

Dying sounds so easy here:
midwinter in the Rocky Mountains
we turned at Vivian Park and drove the truck up
past snowed-in cabins and maw-dark pines.
Up here, the sky comes down to meet you
like our beautiful God is tucking us in
and saying, "sleep" with the pad of each snowflake.
But even were we to park and step from the truck
into this white bed, tuck ourselves in
under snow-bent branches and close our eyes,
I do not think I could let go
of the rock pressing into my back,
of that bird tacking against the sky.

Light Fills the Spaces Between

Again, they spent the day
not kissing. Sometimes their hands
found each other—pale fingers
on pale fingers, wrists on blue
wrist-veins. She liked the way his body
fit into the air. The indigo ache
of shared looks left her craving,
so she dug in her bag for chocolate.
Wanting is the only thing that keeps us
human. *You bought my soul
with chicken biscuits*, she says,
Wouldn't mind if you took the rest of me too.
But he is remembering
how she snort-laughed at Steely Dan,
how she shimmied her shoulders
as she ate his Starbursts and he felt
on the verge of implosion. You can know
some things in an instant—
what a Wednesday morning!
What a thing to find you're a fool
while there's time,
while it's still morning.

My Elegy

Tonight I will pace
between the rows of onions
while my love looks up
trying to drink the stars

Tonight I want to talk about death
to tell him how
I will seep into the moss
nestle in the notch of a pine root
as I've nestled in the crook of his right arm

Tonight I will beg my love
not to play Orpheus
He knows death is warm
and dark brown to me

has watched me bury my hands
under the pea plants
late nights when I fear the gaze
of constellations

They are all shimmer
with nothing to hold, like his hands
on Sunday mornings
slipping over me like light
or lighting bugs
Ephemeral

Sometimes he cups his hands
and asks for my despair
but I cannot give it to him
It is a color he cannot see

Death could hold me and my pain
that is what it does best
So when it comes I ask my love to let me
burrow down like a black beetle
like a glossy worm with delicate rings

Metamorphosis

She told me it was not bad to be a cow.
Unfortunate, that incident with Hera, but
at dawn she could watch the gods
spill their wine across the sky;
and at dusk, hear the chiming of the stars.
Drifting—a placid brown glacier—
demolishing grass, efficient as Achilles
but without wrath, even for the gadfly
that hovers and stings
hovers and stings,

impersonal as snow or fire;
pain simply to make one notice
one's heartbeat
still thrumming.

When Io crossed the Bosphorus,
and well-meaning Prometheus
told her she would not always be a cow,
is it any wonder she sobbed like the ocean?

My Pagan Inclinations Visit the Egypt Exhibit

The pagan in me lifts
splayed fingers to the sun
as she steps out of the car
at the Natural History Museum of Utah.

The pagan in me feels
the air shift each time
your wrist touches mine.
She feels a spirit slide
from under the jade collar
on display; she feels a strange
devotion to a cracked pot
which the ancients filled
with offerings to Horus.

The pagan in me considers
making a blood sacrifice—
pricking her finger,
squeezing seven drops,
mixing in date wine, mandrake
and poppy, a strand of hair—
placing it at your feet.

The pagan in me will always love
your shaved scalp
and boney, blasphemous hands.

We stop at a bust with a plaque
that reads “Head of an Unknown
King.” These blank eyes—
all that is left of the ruler
of Upper and Lower Egypt,
someday will I forget your name?

Most days I worry a lot about dying
but the pagan in me doesn't
fear death. She doesn't fear
my God, or your hatred
of my God, or your allotted
pigeonhole in the afterlife.

The pagan in me imagines us two
reborn as dandelions—
souls free as the wispy seeds,
almost alright with feeling
nothing for you, for anything.

Daylight Savings

One night in early November he decided he couldn't love her and the baby both. He was breathless with the terrible glory growing inside Julia; his chest felt small as the cavity of a walnut. The daisy print on the comforter pressed down on him like the weight of the stars. Scorpio poised, ready to sting. The world stirred in its sleep. The gibbous moon glow spilled like buttermilk over the window frame and flicked a glare onto the glass of his bedside clock. 2AM ticked past and he dreamed of winding the clock back, slithering into his boots and hoofing it to Kansas City in the extra hour before Julia rose, ponderous as a tulip bulb, from bed. He remembered the tulips his father would bring home, smoothing the bruises on his mother's cheek as he gave her the handful of blooms. He thought again of getting up. One thing he knew, though—that a man should only hurt a woman in broad daylight. He wound the clock back and rolled over. He would kiss Julia's cheek and leave after breakfast, before anyone got hurt.

On Eternity

Sundown swallows rise at the fresh of each morning.
Where children dammed the stream,
the cattle egrets pose
and the water spills over like smoothed time.

I write what I know
and the world unwrites all that I know
and the mud-brown fish keep multiplying
in their infinite dance
over dark sand.

Ars Mundi

After too much pie I dreamed
of a figure—the form of a man with the eyes
of a woman—who spread a tapestry before me
at a small motel in Winnemucca.

All lives were woven in its grain,
and cranes and fishing boats and birds,
the smoke of cigarettes and prayers.

I asked *what is left to speak into the void?*

What is left to speak beside the still waters?

And they opened their mouth and said,

To live is not to breathe but to listen

to one's breathing; to listen to the derelict butterfly,

listen to the ants sing Agnus Dei,

listen to the tree and the whippoorwill,

all held within the sky's jaws,

within the moon's cupped palms.

Waking, I stared at the nap of the carpet,
the dust motes caught between blind slats,
and knew I could say nothing—

the world was not made for our words.

After

for Dante Alighieri

You clawed your way
from earth's entrails—
pulled yourself from sloughs
of sick and sewage. Stop
to let your world re-color:
Let that slow tint
of eastern sapphire
steep the horizon—
spread on the wet sky,
a watercolor wash.
Hang up your dressing gown
and turn down the radio
to remember the thrush.
Let the chill dawn draw
the hate of hell
from your pocked marrow.
When you pause at the crosswalk,
remember your mother
slicing persimmons;
remember how you carried
your wicker lunch box to school.
Laugh with the sky now;
dance with the constellations'
tiny flames.
Let the light of Venus
urge new loves upon you.
Gaze as though none
has seen before, and none
will see again.

Lifting Prayer

For Walt Whitman

I like to think of lines, here, in the gym. Lines of poems or the sloping line of my shoulder—
And the little vein running down it, a diagonal river.

I like to think of Keats (whom I imagine as Timothee Chalamet),
On a riverbank beneath the nightingale's tree,
Hacking delicately, poet's soul living in a bird-frail body.

On the leg press machine, I wonder if I should languish a bit more—
Lock myself up for a week or two and commune with the ghost of Emily Dickinson,
Or become a nun and write soul-struggles in sprung rhythm.

But then I think of you, Walt Whitman,
You, wandering the streets of New York, nodding to the friendly prostitutes in their dresses like
empty candy wrappers—
You, in the barebosomed night, in the melting cold, in the stinging heat, in the gutters, the arenas,
the valleys cramped with houses,
The triage tents smelling of green-tinged flesh, the once-green fields where dead hands lie
like flowers—
You, on your knees, on a hill-top, on your back under an oven-sky, practicing becoming a grass
blade.

I try so hard to eat life like a tea sandwich,
Can you teach me to gobble it like a meatball footlong, spilling the sauce over my chin,
Feeling my blood pump-pump like it does when I'm lifting?

And yet, tea sandwiches are part of me too—
I love their straight lines of bread and jam and bread,
And I love the lines of my planner and the lines on the shirt of my love (an accountant).

Maybe we all get to be what we are. Is that what you meant in rejoicing in yourself—
That I should glory in my bench press and my poetry and my tea mug and my Diet Coke problem
And my houseplants and my horror of camping and crusty bread and jelly sandwiches?
Were you trying to say that we can be like the angels—
With too many wings for the prophets to count?

In a Market in Palermo

watermelons like cool moons,
brined olives splashed from tubs,
bergamots, grapefruits, pomelos, capers,
cherries rattled into paper packets,
reek of oysters, gore of blood oranges,
the voices of men frying chickpea cakes
and young men incising swordfish
in this din of color, I can't feel myself dying—
can't hear the last trumpet through this deluge of sound

Reminder for Days When I Cry in my Car

There will be lunchtimes, there will be first-snows,
there will be blue egg shards under trees in Aprils,
the jumbled notes children pull from upright pianos,
loud red poppies on California roadsides,
loud red fast-food awnings and a hint
of fried potatoes. Someone will bike
home with a bouquet of nasturtiums;
someone will slice an apple for her
nephew; at the bus stop, a papery woman
will pat at her lipstick, then smooth her bob.
There will be singing, toasting, sobbing, leaping.
And every year the sun will try to pace itself,
buying us time to notice the sidewalk ants
before all this beauty is turned to ashes.

Communion

I can't stand snowfall
at 6:20 in the still-blue dark before aurora.
But it's here God lets down his guard,
not asking man to think
him perfect, merciful—just
craving conversation with the girl
stepping through puddles of unsticking snow.
Here God tries on
the phases of the moon, pale
as my fingers curling in cold fists.
On mornings such as this,
with nothing but sleep to look forward to,
I tell myself I'm just a thought, floating
to my snow-brown car,
not body enough for the cold to touch me.
Maybe that is why he sends it,
looming like Jonah's whale—
to remind me that I am
body enough to kick against the pricks,
these prickling flakes of shadowy cold.

Midnight Drive

To think I spent nine waking years there—
in a land driven mad by the Doppler effect,
where I thought so much about the power of Purell

and the gloss of Jen's pinky toenail;
where a girl could live on likes alone.
I have done my squat pulses at 7 a.m. and prayed to my planner;

but tonight, I've escaped, in the passenger seat of your Protégé
to study the delicate droop of french fries
and gulp down carbonated life, admiring my size 6 shoes on your dashboard.

Keep your gaze forward, clandestine friend,
Like a darker-eyed me in your sky-gray hoodie.
Don't tell me that anything has an end.

Tell me that the fire is as I imagine it,
that the mallards by the road mean something,
that when I walk out the world will pause a moment.

The Witch's Song

I called you here,
to the cold dust of my burning
under a dying star,
under Jupiter and Saturn.
Berries from the yew tree,
cold with dew and dark,
have fallen on my resting place,
brushed loose by your passing.

Like you I crawled through a shadowland
accompanied by the raven's cry,
by the brooding lullaby of the wren—
from love to love
over browned pine needles
and bracken thick with flies.

We have plucked nightshade
to weave ourselves crowns
and called ourselves queens of the darkness,
made posey charms of rue and rosemary,
and the trees bent down for us.
But the stars will move you,
as once they moved me,
from love to love,
from losing to losing.

July Evening in the Foothills

and we were talking the length of the neighborhood
and we were laughing at the kids in bear costumes
selling lemonade by their front door

cicadas hiatus
a moment of clairvoyance

before us stretched a white sidewalk,
a little house—yard bursting with dandelions—
and lighted windows, and electric bills
and walks too hot and too cold and too golden

Standing in Front of van Gogh's Irises at the Getty Museum

How warm it must have been—
when Van Gogh licked the sun
off his chin, pecked
through his barred window and remembered
irises!

When I leave the shadows have grown cold.
I'm swept downtown in the dirty river
of traffic. Static bubbles
from the radio. The brakes creak to silence.
On the corner, a girl signs her name in pink chalk on the sidewalk.

Mid-Air

Suspended somewhere above the Rockies,
snowy ridges sharp with morning,
I turned and caught you
Sleeping and thought, “This is true
love”—the subtle scruff brushing
your cheeks, rose stipple of a healing blemish
on your jawline, the crow’s feet around your eyes.
On our way to Denver as the crow flies.
I faked pregnancy with a fanny pack, flaunting
the one-bag limit, and felt a burden
of love for that unreal baby.
Behind us a child wails, waking you,
and I wonder the plane doesn’t plummet,
breaking crystalline air,
with the weight of that sound.

Second Honeymoon

Sitting on the frail Malaysian coast she knew
they had both faded like a postcard. She picked coral
clots from tide pools, turning each bleached
skeleton in her hand. Black needles
of a skulking sea urchin, the cyan sea
looking like something she might have
ordered from a bar in younger years,
before her eyes became cold pearls.
She remembered a white room, curtains
billowing like angels, and the hurt
of finally having what you've wanted.
Off to the right, forest jutting into the bay.
The wind brought notes of his sweat, mixed with allamanda.

The house is warm tonight. I miss you—
Somewhere over Salt Lake a magpie swoops,
clattering through the fog. The sedge has grown
withered and dry at the edge of the mud.
I sit in bed, watch movies you would like
less than I do. This late October night
when all the trees are buckling with wind
reminds me of another autumn night
when rough air shook me from a scant half sleep
over the sea. I can't stand turbulence.
Tonight, I close the shutters on the dark
blue cold. The loose leaves of the oak outside—
misshapen stars that graze my window. Think
of me love, when you close the office door.

After Issa

Holding your hand—
warm wave over a cold shell,
your snores crash like breakers.

*Time is an untuned harmonium
That Muzaks our nights and days.*

and we are forever
 jostling each other
 in and out of that God-rhythm they call love—
last night, for instance,
 we were hurting each other
 at the end of a perfect day,
 under the floodlights that loomed over us, their brightness cold
 and hollow as an empty theater.

Time does not heal anything.
 Only gods can do that.
But God told us we are gods:
 our fingers,
 our lips,
 our singing softly on the drive home.