Carnival Lights
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For Anthony,

who made it possible for me to start on this journey

and

for Aaron,

who probably doesn’t realize how important a role he played in its completion
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I
Start

Lining up near a throng
of other little girls

striped knee socks rising
from velcro sneakers of pink

and purple clashing with camp
shirts orange and white

we waited on dead grass
no longer green until

a whistle broke through
the air, startling our crowd

into motion, and in the middle
of the pack, with whipping

ponytails blinding sight
with elbows and knees

building barriers
locking us like puzzle pieces

keeping the herd together
I found my way out

and flew toward a splintered
makeshift totem pole finish

line upon discovering
that I could run.
The Girls of LeRoy

The media has descended
on the former Jell-O factory town
where bricks fade and crack on front
porches of once-grand Federalist-style
homes now subdivided to fit
three families where once
only one could really live

and the old folks who are still around
will tell them about the days when the town's
people could tell what flavor
the factory had put in production
that day by checking the color
of Oatka Creek

and how no one really knew what chemicals
the creek took on and brought down
to school-grounds and playgrounds
but the factory gave work and nice homes
to its small New York town...
until it didn't.

Some think back to the toxic train crash
releasing tens of thousands of gallons
of trichloroethylene (among other things)
into the soil just outside of town
but that was over thirty years ago
and they trucked that dirt away,
didn't they?

And all of the sudden attention
brought to this tiny hamlet
of industrial demise
has arrived on the backs of sixteen
teenage girls who cannot stop flailing
and cursing
and twisting,

and they’ve tested the water
and they’ve tested the ground
and they’ve examined the food
that they eat in school and at home
but still their tics multiply
layering on symptom
after symptom
with no proven trigger.

Mass hysteria is whispered in the streets
but the parents don’t want to hear it
and everyone is looking
for a convenient place to point a finger
even if there are no pyres this time
while the girls of LeRoy with eyes too wide
and bodies too bruised
continue to convert stress
into physical pain
continue to wait for the cards to tell them
what is going to happen next.
**My First Barbie**

She was a cowgirl
in white with blonder hair
and bluer eyes

than mine and white
spangles dangling
from impossibly large

boobies and western
boots (also white)
that I cried and cried

over when they went
missing and demanded
a pair of my own.

Her Ken was tan
with the same white
cowboy shirt as hers

with black pleather
pants and a plastic
cowboy hat (also
black) and they took
turns riding Barbie’s
perfect palomino

and I knew no amount
of crying could ever
get me that horse

but still I cried
going to bed with Barbie
and Ken and the horse

all three tucked under
my pillow, hiding my hurt
at not being enough like her.
Portrait of the Poet as a Teenager

Chipped cherry polish  
   with no acetone in sight

Lighthouse and breakers  
   after all the sailors  
      have gone

Incomplete of face  
   and frowning  
      and already worried  
about lines

She's crashing your party -  
   why haven't you noticed?

Ripped jeans  
   and plaid converse,  
      unwillingly dressed  
to the nines

Whippoorwill singing  
   her onomatopoeia  
      lying naked on the lawn

Bees buzzing  
   suddenly nocturnal  
and looking for a fight

pleading in the mirror,  
   O, won't you show me  
      from another side?
Eat Me, Drink Me

you try and try and try
    but your body just won't fit
    into a life
you only imagine you have
and you change and change
    and keep on changing
    and none of it matters
nothing can squeeze you
    into the shape
    in your mind
and the pocketwatch says you're late
    but you can't remember
where it is you’re supposed to be
    if there’s even anywhere
    other than here

Alice fell down the rabbit hole
    and stepped through the mirror
talked to caterpillars
    and playing cards
ate and drank
    what she was told
    to eat and drink
and she never questioned
    the wonders she found
    in those unlikely places
just herself
Lauren's Basement

Gray couches loomed
as mountains scattered
across a world unknown,

icebergs always
giving us reason
to fall
to the carpet
sea below.

Spines of couches
became narrow passes
requiring balance,
precision;
always returning
to an arctic crag,
our twin minds
saw those icebergs
everywhere:
*India, China, Israel, Mexico...*

Too loud,
we were banished
to her bedroom
of plush elephants
and ancient coffee
tins full of exotic coins
  coins that weren't round
  coins that were two colors
  coins with holes in the middle
  coins that didn't feel like metal at all

coins I slipped into my shoe
stolen as a Saturday night
sleepover bled
into Sunday morning
Hebrew school carpool
tumbling down the sidewalk
chiming like bells –
*India, China, Israel, Mexico...*
she would have given them to me
had I asked.
A reunion memorial
told of her adventures
the first news
I had
in over a decade.
Continents were explored –
This time, for real.
This time, apart.
But icy roads
require balance,
precision
and the carpet sea
was no longer there
to break her fall,
no iceberg cushions
helped navigate
her way home.

To find them now
where wouldn't we go?
*India, China, Israel, Mexico…*
Still Life in Car, with Snow

I am living in a Lincoln Towncar
    a silver boat ferrying everything
    I could carry
the only harbor left open to me
    in a winter heavy with storms

I live in this Lincoln
    because his last name was Hernandez
    and not Moskowitz or Goldstein
like my parents had been hoping

I live in this Towncar
the driver's seat hunched and broken
where my father sat
    slumped against the window
    waiting for his next fare
I sleep facing the back of it
    closing my eyes,
I am haunted by the memory
    of his thick fingers around my throat
    toes hovering six inches
    from the kitchen floor

I live in my Lincoln
I am skinny and cold and tired
    and the snow has been
    falling
    for hours
    for days
and I sleep with all that I own
    piled on top of me
    for camouflage
    for warmth

I do not know yet
    that I will only need to survive for another
    four months
and I do not know yet
    that the snow will stop
Right now
  it is February
   and I am 22
   and I will always be 22
   and living in this Towncar

It is snowing
  and it will always be snowing
and I'm just glad nobody has come
to tow me away
Into the West

highway transformations
criss-cross the country
turnpike entrances
do dot the states
places recounted
by parkway exits
co-gen plants
give way
to corn fields
to the continental
divide
before reaching
the lands of the plastic people

there exists a point
after industry
before complacency
where scenic overlooks
become contemplations
of prairie grasses
the journey
begins at a toll booth

entrance ramps
gas stations
rest stops
mile markers
of the passage of time

interstitial spaces
with roadside sculpture
and memorial crosses
replace mini-malls
and truck depots
where antelope
really do play
against barbed wire backdrops
and the unnatural
beauty
of a smog-inspired
neon pink sun
melting
into the horizon

but before I-80
dead ends
into the ocean
before you reach the salt flats
that were once
vast seas
before tumbleweed
adheres to the front
bumper

we
have already passed
into the west
The Last Reading

Words flowed from her mouth,
bees smoothed by honey,
amplifier hum without the feedback.
Harmony and melody,
euphony and dissonance at once.
Audience sitting awed,
the sacred silence of the local library
louder for the tension.

The infinity in a pause,
the time between poem's end
and solemn applause,
carries a broken
memory of the moment.
Confused,
fumbling for a thought,
I waited on her words.

She quoted Roethke instead,
read her poem
on the power of sound
then never read her work again.
Recollection conflates
both verses though.
I remember them all wrong,
the song of the memory
mattering more
than the absolute truth.
Carnival Lights

across the river tonight
cast a kaleidoscope glow
    on dusky water
we stop and stare
    the bridge too far
to get there from here
    but the light
from the Ferris wheel
throws chaotic neon
    onto the Passaic
reflected back
a motley of pink and yellow and green
    a fractured and blurred
    rainbow mirror
just shimmering
    shimmering
The First Miracle

He made sparrows from clay
mixing earth
with just enough water
creating a medium
that He could mold
and shape
the idea of a beak
the merest suggestion
of wings and feathers –
a child’s interpretation
of birds

He was scolded for this creation
since it was the Sabbath
and the fashioning of toys
was deemed an unholy act
since even HaShem rested
one day out of seven

Despite their protest
He breathed life
into their small bodies
and they flew
and all who saw knew it to be a miracle
the first of many that Jesus would perform
though some say it was at the wedding
in Cana that He revealed
the first sign
the Quran has no such problems
with the divinity of a child
Lauds

Praise each morning
arrives on hushed lips
before the sun casts
its amber glow,
before water bedews
chapped mouths
and parched tongues
arid from hours
of lover’s work.
Anoint me with myrrh
before the hour departs.
Crown me in tuberose
and jessamine, their silver glow
our canticle and benediction
sung to the fickle moon
before she retires,
the Office of Aurora
the exclusive province
of newfound lovers
and the lonely nightingale.
The Baking of Bread

We baked our first loaf not long after the honeymoon in a kitchen too small for two people from a dough of flour and water salt and sugar and yeast, and there was joy in the making and wonder in the simple perfection of the work. A bland loaf, of no discernible flavor, in white plastic covered with primary colored balloons bought at 7-11 would have been so much easier. But couples cannot survive on white bread alone. So we found rye flour and whole wheat and discovered that these breads do not rise with a simple recipe of five ingredients. Additional gluten was needed, molasses and beer make for a better rye, honey sweetens whole wheat, satisfying in a way refined sugar never could, and the kitchen became ever more cluttered as measuring cups and canisters competed for counter space we did not have, requiring us to refine our technique along the way. Knowing to check the dough ball at the end of the second kneading, determining if it needs more water or more flour, testing the spring of the ball to see if it needs more time to rise, accepting that the task is not as easy as putting the ingredients together and leaving them to do as they will. And we will keep at it. There are butterhorns yet to make, and pumpernickel and panetone, sourdough and cinnamon swirls, maybe even a Santa Lucia Crown for next Christmas.
Song for another Adam

The world came into being--
an emanation of divine essence,
a playground for the first man.
Created on the sixth day,
Adam walked among bird and beast
and seeing the animals paired
and mating
finding comfort in each other,
he learned what it meant to be alone.

He went to sleep by himself
and dreamed of fantastic beings --
amalgams of parts pieced together
tessellating wing and fin and claw
to torso, imagining all the forms
a mate might take.

And so you wait
for your life’s complement
like the original bearer of your name
but without the magic of creation
to transform your rib into a companion
and make you whole.

Would that I could give
you one of mine, fashion a likeness
from my bone while you sleep
so that you never
have to spend another night
in solitude. We live fallen
from the garden
but believe in that magic,
hold the incantation in your heart:

she is coming
she is coming
she will come
Desire

I want your lips,
   lips that are mine
neither by birth
   nor commitment,
I want them to kiss places
   with no proper names
   in the annals of anatomy.
We will name them
   together.
   We will baptize those places
   with our breath
   the order of consonants and vowels
   secret
   and idiosyncratic
   and shared
   in silence.

I want your eyes.
   I want to claim them
   in a way that I cannot.
I want them on me
   following me
   feeling their gaze move and rest
   in time with my hips
and I want to see what I look like
   inside them.
Blood

I know not where my blood comes from.
It flows from a source
    as yet unidentified
but its course, though wild, is true
    and strong
its beat predictably irregular
    moving in time with my longings
    and seasonal tides.

Biology dictates its production --
created in the marrow of my being
    since birth it has traveled miles
veins and arteries
    atria and ventricle,
replicating itself in daughter cells
escaping through accident or extraction
or slowly dying,
    cell by cell
eliminated over a lifetime.

I know not where my blood comes from
but I would mingle your blood with my blood
    your flesh with my flesh
and fashion life beyond ours,
    or failing that
I would open each artery and vein,
    tear a thousand glass splinters
    from every limb
    and let it flow
if it meant one more moment with you.
Sext

Noonday sun
smiling down upon us,
we have come
to the most auspicious
of hours for prayer.
The garden agrees,
blossoms opening
their faces to the sky
the same way we tilt
towards each other.
Mystically favored
though it may be,
this hour has ever been
the shortest.
My Collection of Tarot Cards is Contraband

their intended function existing in conflict
with the new vows I took last Easter
Vigil, when a priest baptized me
in the name of the father
    and the son
    and the holy spirit
spending part of his annual allowance of chrism
on my heathen forehead, claiming my soul

for Jesus. So now what do I do with the collection
of runes hidden from my husband in a box
that he vaguely intuits should not be approached,
that also hides spell scrolls
    and fairy lures
    charms for lovers long since lost and won,
carved from gem and antler and bone

quietly collecting dust? And what would my mother
think about the state of the tallit given her little girl
on that Bat Mitzvah day
    decades ago,
well before my Hebrew was traded for Latin
and tattoos barred me from Jewish burial,
its fabric now shading a lamp with its faded stripes
of white and blue? Never again to be used for prayer

the shawl is no less holy,
    the antler and bone as beautiful
as the day they were hewn. Can I no longer
contemplate the cards without risking
the wrath of my religion? Who do you consult
    about the proper protocols
for retiring the artifacts of a former faith?

I sometimes wonder what Jesus did with his tallit
before the cross made it passé. I wonder
    who gave it to him
    whether they asked for it back,
I wonder what the priests did with their bones and charts
once used for tracking the movement of stars while seeking the will of god.
Stork

My brother gave me a baby for my birthday. Wrapped up in a bow in the backseat of his SUV, the infant writhed in the discomfort of being a tiny human. I accepted the gift as I would any other, as though arriving unannounced with a small child was a perfectly common way to celebrate the day of a sister's birth, and I did not doubt for a moment that this baby was now mine, a foundling brought to me instead of the usual scented candles or another copy of the complete works of Shakespeare. So I carved it a home in my little one-bedroom apartment, nestled among the houseplants and the parakeets, lined a dresser with blankets for a crib, and I was just about to pronounce the baby's name for the first time when I woke up, alone, beside a half-empty drawer of socks.
Fabric for the Soul

The Lord in pleasant pastures knits
a hood and cloak for those who wander.

A vengeful god, He plies his trade
with skeins of scratchy spindrift,

creating gossamer webs to gird
the hearts of the righteous,

chain link crowns for fools
thought wise enough to wear them.

His loops and purls grace the hips
of gypsy dancers in the valley,

covering the skulls of saints
and sinners, their threadbare robes

providing no protection upon
entering the halls of Valhalla.

Those lost in the dark forest cry
for their share of his raiment,

carving their runic warnings
for the woad-adorned warrior,

spinning straw and tears
to supplement their lot.

The mothers of our fathers
taught Him well his craft.
The Anniversary Present

Orchids
arrived Sunday –
unopened, purple-black
full of the promise of petals
to come.

Days such
as these, also
promising, seldom bloom.
Sonnets and insomnia take hold
instead.

Petals
never emerge,
bulbs remain closed, blossoms
failing to form even when sleep
arrives.

Flowers
in this dreamscape,
fed with bitterest tears,
rip their way through imperfect earth
in vain.

Throw
the vase away. Why
cry for what’s already
dead. Salt water never could make
it live.
The Naming of Things

We dance around the vocabulary
    but there isn’t a word
    to suit
and all the ones tested
    sit ill on tongue
    and teeth
neither of us certain
    that a words exists
    to define our relationship
    one to the other
neither of us certain
    we need definition

Adam went about the garden
    telling every bird and beast
    what it ought to be called
ignoring the fact
    that they were what they were
    whether He liked it
or not
ignoring the fact
    that the snake
    would charm
    and then bite
no matter what name
    He gave him
Compline

At the end of day
the hours of Our Lady
come to a rest in the garden.
Brighter blooms have closed
off their sweetness to the night
sky, scents of evening primrose
and moonflower cloak the air
with their musk
and I grow weary of this love.
I shoulder this ache along with the rites
of the hour, kneeling in penitence,
fumbling through hymn and antiphon,
quietly awaiting the benediction
while a mockingbird
can be heard singing
Salve Regina.
The Bedroom

This is the room where we first shared a pillow, tucking crown under chin on hand-me-down sheets, pretending it was comfortable enough to sleep that way. This is the place where I first saw you naked if we don’t count the picture I happened to find on your computer. These are the walls that sheltered us from the storm, eggshell white and cracking though they are, they still held Sandy at bay. That’s the window where we watched the storm roll through our town, though we couldn’t see from where we sat just how bad it would be around the corner. This is the mattress that became suddenly small while sleeping back to back, careful not to touch the other without prior permission. This is the bed where we held back our tears, and where we will finally let them all go after it is too late, clutching each other for one more night, one more day, one more kiss that we won’t know will be our last. This is the last place we thought we would be. This is the place where our marriage will end.
Minor Arcana

The Queen of Swords
flew out from a copy of Kant
and I suddenly recalled
where I had hidden my tarot cards.

Wedged into poetry
and prose to hide them from prying
eyes, unwilling to surrender
their secrets to the trash

in order to preserve some semblance
of canon law within our marriage.
I sought them out now, started
A scavenger hunt with myself

through every book I owned.
The four of cups was marking
a page in HD’s Trilogy
while Aristotle held the nine

of swords. Emily Dickinson
carried the Page of Pentacles,
a young woman holding out
for a transformation that may

or may not come. The King
of Wands continues to elude
me. I flip through every volume
and pamphlet on my bookshelves

in vain. The set is broken.
Too beautiful to put away
forever, I dream in their images,
willing his return to me.
Love Songs at the Crossings

My dove in the clefts of the rock,
I wonder what will last longer,
the memory of her lips
or my kiss from further away

in the hiding places of the mountainside?
There are many ways to love, you said,
and I wonder if the saying is true:
the love we get is the love we deserve,

a response from the universe
returning to us that which we project
and demand.
Show me your face.

Eight hundred years of love,
eight hundred hundred moments
spent in the arc of falling in love
have brought us to this place,

this sea beyond the sea –
we can't be strangers now.
Let me hear your voice, you said.
I sang even though you could not hear me

and it made you smile to think of me singing
while the vineyards were in bloom,
while the birds folded their wings and cooed,
and we bowed to something we felt

but could never describe.
I tried to remember the day we promised
that we would never hurt each other
but that was when we still had sharp teeth

like the little foxes that ruin the vineyards
and steal away to the crossings.
Catch for us the foxes
before they find the fruit,
for if your heart is not mine,
if your lips are not mine
at least I will have this harvest,
this song before the reaping.

What is the song?
Who is this paradise for?
Who is it we fear is watching us
when we make love?

We are each here
to allow the other to be here,
in this paradise that was not meant for us,
but we both know we cannot lose
a paradise we've both seen.

Good morning, love.
I hope you slept well.

With thanks to the Song of Songs, the poetry and conversation of Nathalie Handal, and the magic of text messaging.
III
The Topography of Water

From the shore
a vast blue stretches beyond sight
inviting
forbidding
spreading across an endless expanse
crystal waves
lulling and luring the careless eye

The ocean's siren song
has called many
to their end
will claim many more
the still
immense
field of blue
no more than a lie

tranquil blue-green
shifts
to cloudy blue-gray
blue-black at night
when there is no way
to know anything below
the surface
but never more
dangerous
than when she is white
foam and spray
hiding riptide
and undertows
pulling
and churning
while from the sand
it looks no more
than mermaid's play
Nothing
is ever as it seems
    beyond the shallows
currents
unseen by the eye
carry the saltiest sailors
    astray
ripples of purest silver
    and dreams of sunken treasure
collide in men's hearts
    pulling them below
while the topography of water
    holds her secrets close
Palette

When light fails
and shadows color
your mind
shading gray
what was once joyous
and rainbow
cast your last crayon
like a flare into the night sky
I'll find you by touch
I'll bring all my paints
and brushes
We will remap the stars
with Elmer's glue
and gold glitter
We will repaint
the sky's faded glory
in crystal blue
Still Life

Choice is balanced on the edge of a knife:
will he use alizarin crimson or rose madder
for the blood in this still life?

The composition forms, a youngish wife
but captured alone, painted sadder
in muted colors laid by the palette knife.

Look closer. Her pale face is rife
with tinted concerns. Does it even matter
whether this place still holds life

for her? No longer the rosy-cheeked naif
he wed, her faith is rent, tattered
drawing her closer to the jagged knife

on the counter, wrist offering a slice
of her dreams, now mostly scattered
to the western winds. Still, life

pulses on, whether woman alone or wife
with dreams intact or shattered
with or without the will to wield the knife,
whether or not she can admit: this is still life.
Empirical Madness

[Parmenides] speaks of perceiving and thinking as the same thing.
- Theophrastus

The voice of a man is whispering to you
   but it is 4am and you are alone
   and all of the radios and TVs
   are silent, and when you press
your ear against the cold
walls of the apartment
the only sound you hear is a pounding,
   the blood in your head
pulsating in vessels against skin

but when you step away he is there
   again
   broadcasting his voice
       his words just beyond
your reach.

The instant you try to listen harder
   the sound is gone.
The man's voice fades into the white noise
   of refrigerator hum
   and fishtank bubble.

You worry that this is what it is to be a prophet
   or a madman
   and cannot rationalize the difference
   between the two.

If you can hear him, if your senses
   tell you that the sound of his speech
      arrives at your eardrums
the voice must exist
   even if you cannot find it
even if you cannot figure out what it is trying to tell you
   even if you are unsure whether to listen closer
or not at all.
Wandering through Lebanon

I found an old house at the corner
of 10th and Cumberland
in a town named after a country
in the Middle East
in the middle of Pennsylvania
during the summer I ran
away from my marriage

And this house is crumbled and fading
its lingering grandeur
now subdivided
with one feral rosebush growing
from a crack in the front walk
forcing its way through
uneven angled brick
no one tending it
still alive
still vivid

Sun-burnt petals
dry and ragged at the edges
brave the bees and the afternoon heat
but it blooms
it is blooming
it is fucking in bloom
in August
long after all the other roses
have died back
or been cut and put in vases
decorating dinner tables
and sideboards
for those who cared for them
who bred them
and watered them
for the specific purpose of their decorative death
and I wonder what that rosebush knows
that I do not.
Someone tell me
would you please?
And I once said
    that I write a lie into every poem
    to put on the page
    everything needed to be said
without being tethered
    to the truth
So what here is untrue?
    That it took 30 minutes
    to get the rings
      off my finger
    that the finger is still healing
      after 3 days
    that it might be months before
    that left-hand digit
      will feel normal again?

I walk on
    the color of those roses
      fresh in my mind
      not red like blood
      or valentines
    but of the terrible lipstick
      my mother wore
      and smeared on my face
      in an effort to make me pretty
and I wonder if anyone
    will call me pretty
      ever again
      now that I am ringless
      and untethered
or if anyone would call those roses
    pretty
    unadorned and wild
    and just blooming
the way nature intended
    even though they are dry
    and ragged
    and I want to believe they are
      still pretty
tell me that they’re still pretty
      would you please?
Summer’s End

The boundary of seasons  
blurs as leaves change hue  
and die in a flutter  

towards the forest floor  
making branches bare  
preparing for the buds  
of spring. I lie naked  
next to you and dream  
of flames. I lie naked  

next to him and dream  
of nothing  
but falling leaves  

no idea that their season  
is over, no concept  
of the still of winter.
Atypical Aubade

The glow of the computer screen
mimics the skyfire
smoldering the east
and we cannot find the words
to sign off from this evening
of syllables and sighs.
Retreating to our separate
beds, we grope
for new vocabulary,
forever fishing for
another way to
say goodnight.
Static

Crackle and hum clears
to the sound of voices...

What did he say?
Top five at five coming to you live from the middle of everywhere...

Turn the radio up.

Turn the radio off.

Station to station, musical inflation broadcasts
across the U.S. nation

and we hear it all       and we hear nothing.

The stronger the signal
the larger the audience
the more similar the sound.

But someone underground has a transmitter
and a generator
    and is broadcasting voices
      most of us will never hear.

Popping
    with electromagnetic interference
      the battle cry is clear...

Talk hard. Steal the air.

Turn the radio off.

Turn the radio up.

The antenna struggles
to pick up the faint trace
    of the pirate signal.

A deft hand manning the dial
can just find it
through the sound
of falling snow.
Eastbound on 78

The wind chill
    made the air
    feel 14 degrees
    below
when I left this morning
    before the sun
showed its face
to a sky of perfect
    sapphire
    blue

and the sky is punctuated with stars
    too bright and too many to name
    and I want you
to tell me which ones they are

but I leave while you still sleep
gently kissing your forehead goodbye
    and though you stir
your snoring continues

I drive east
    and watch the sun
work its magic
on the Pennsylvania landscape
    the colors of it breaking
my heart
    over and over
I see the spectrum
    everywhere
in fields of snow
on the rock walls
    lining the highway
in the memory of your hair
    as it catches the moonlight
before you wake
Waiting for the Snow

Window bright but gray
foreshadowing stormy weather,
we wait for the snow

with neither dread
nor hope for what it may bring.
Let it rain down white

petals of fresh joy
for small children. See its gloom
if that be your lot.

It is not ours. Here,
we wait at the window
our pens ready to record

the storm either way. It may
not come after all. But no.
Look. It has begun.
Cento: In the Darkness

It’s hard to concern ourselves
with what winter means if there’s no spring.
Our time in darkness is payment for the loss
of beauty marks, the shadow
of plum under night-shaded
broken telescope worries
reassuring that we, just as temporary,
are beautiful too.

A bell can ring, toll, chime,
imagine decades of scripture painted
to fill some measure of space.

If I am to meet you on the water,
let our better angels
enter through our blood stream,
let me be pulled from the quicksand
by a sweet, sticky sap
slipping in between the seams of my skin.
I’m praying for a morning star.

If I am to meet you, I will meet you.

With many thanks to the members of my workshop whose words make up this cento: Sean Battle, Adam Bowser, Elizabeth Kim, Nate Tagg, and Bryanna Tidmarsh.
Northern Sky

Planets don’t twinkle,
    you said.
    We flew down
    a winding country road
the ink dark sky
    showing more stars
than I could name
    and planets besides.
    Jupiter
(it was decided)
    was the planet in question
glowing gold, hanging low on the horizon
    an overripe melon
light years away.

Polaris
    and the dippers
(big and small)
    maybe Orion’s belt
were the only ones whose stars I could point at
    and match to names I knew.

I know there are others out there.
    Cassiopeia on her throne,
        her daughter beside her.
The dragon and the hydra,
        both slain by Heracles.
Aries and Taurus
    and Gemini and Cancer
        and the rest of the zodiac
populate the night
somewhere, in some other sky,
the stories of the ancients
    all laid out among the stars.

How do I know if it’s a planet?
    was the question,
wanting to tell our story
    through the stars
picking out the objects that orient
    you to me
picking out the path that led us here.

I decided
we should be able to use the planets, too,
make the constellations
that will carry our story forever,
one that will be remembered
by us
and the stars
and no one else.

Name them The Queen’s Coin
letting Orion’s belt
be its silvery circle.
Let Jupiter be the light in the ballroom
at Casa Bardici.
Pick out four legs and a tail
(call her Beatrix, the Beagle).

And maybe
(just maybe)
on some clearer night, we’ll look
up to the Northern Sky
find each other in the brightness
and name it you and me.
Notes

“Love Songs at the Crossings” contains text originally found in the Song of Songs in the Bible and Nathalie Handal’s collection, Poet in Andalusia. The poem also contains fragments of conversation with Handal and excerpts from text messages sent from and received by my phone.

“Cento: In the Darkness” contains lines from poetry written by the students of Rachel Hadas’ graduate poetry workshop during the spring semester of 2013. I appreciate the inspiration of my fellow classmates: Sean Battle, Adam Bowser, Elizabeth Kim, Nate Tagg, and Bryanna Tidmarsh.

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