Breaking Bodies

by

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Landing in the Forest of the New

This is a dreamscape, not a landscape. You’re foolish to try to make them one and the same.

But you are foolish and try to force things that don’t belong: concrete into cliff sides,

blankets into birds, denial into deer— trying to convert your mind to fit

what your body has dictated to you. There’s no turning back from this path.

In the Forest of the New your footsteps never form or disappear so quickly you’d swear

you never existed in the past— don’t look back there’s nothing there

but shadows and bodies made of hard salt. All there is to do is keep the pace,

one foot in front of the other.
Deer Dance

You’re speaking with a throat full of pine needles. Or little knives, like the little knives that fill your lungs in the breathing. A language I don’t know but understand. Deerhead. Elkfeet. You speak and your words smell like freshness robbed, like something about to crack. Or snap. Something is about to burn. Smoke curls on your tongue. Something is about to catch. You are made of kindling.

I close my eyes because I saw you in a dream. You stood before me under the pine trees and raised your hands to the sky above. Toward the incomplete map of stars scarred by my lack of knowledge. I do not know all the stars or maybe I have forgotten them if we are infused with this knowing at birth. Like an omen, something to be interpreted. You raised your hands to the sky, I thought, to bring attention to the way your body shifted. Feet of an elk, body of a man, head of a buck with full branching antlers. You were naked. I was naked. You were a man, and I did not know what I was. My body was amorphous or like a doll’s, in the shifting nature of dreams, if I had legs I did not know what was between them. If it was cold that night, in our forest under the pine trees, under the scratch of sky, I did not feel it.

You raise your hands and throw your head back in a way that would break the neck of a mortal man, standing against the moon-sun.

Are you my spirit animal? I have always wanted some divine sign to guide me. Just once. To show me the way. For a little less loneliness. Is it wrong to co-opt this divinity?

You throw your head back and the beginnings of flames rise from your throat.

“Everything born must eventually burn.”
Depression—Kept in This Room

For days I let my own body
let my own body.

The natural smell of me,
Earth damp musk,

my body’s ripe surfaces
if ever there were ripe surfaces.

To wait in bed
for my sheets to turn
dirt from cotton.
Mushrooms grow in-between

my toes, spread apart.
Maybe earthworms

could thrive in my armpits.
Spiders under my hair,

nest of bone nettles.
Moss growing in

the dampness under covers,
places yet uncovered.

Patella soften enough,
become shells for snails,

shoot spindly love darts
along my anus crack.

Frogs sing in the hollows of my sockets,
lay their eggs to hatch

in the mire of cerebrospinal.
Maybe flowers can grow

throat-to-nose, thrusting
out each nostril bees fly,

my new scent held by fuzzy legs.
Ferns on my face,

eyebrows homes for maggots
chewing on peri-dead flesh.
Nail beds become spore beds
big enough to sleep in.

Intestines-heart-stomach.
liver-kidneys-muscle,

make mole rats,
make mole tunnels—

let the rotting me
become the rot of me

maybe. Maybe I’ll sleep

another hundred years,
find out the possibilities.
Perfection, She Said She Wanted
-Christmas 2011

My father makes the meal. His wife sets the table. The heirloom china. Porcelain and perfect. Displays of meats and sauces touch the white and never stain. The vodka that soaks clear.

Arguments and tears fall in Russian on my ears. Her breath is sweet and her words slick, liquored.

*He doesn’t love me,* she mumbles. Breath hot into my ear. *He’s your father, make him change.*

Her hand slides along and up a married man’s thigh. Before it was my father, now she rests her wedding bound finger above my brother-in-law’s knee.

My father doesn’t notice. We became bastards late in life.

I walk for miles. Until my skin is white porcelain. Until cracks grow in me, blue around the edges. Steam explodes from me this January.

I huff out air. Watch the way my breath makes the invisible seen. Puffy, white, I breathe out the sheep in full. Complete. The sky is growing greyer. I hang my neck back as if I were dead. Snow starts to fall. Down on my long bangs, down on my pink cheeks. I close my eyes.

I circle the block again. And again. At dusk children go home. I know not to.
Trichotillomania

It’s too big a word for her interior.

The knuckles are swollen from their constant task

like those of old women

picking at the threads in uneven stitches,

clucking disdainfully at the lack of skill. What are you looking for?

Something different, she says.
One that doesn’t fit in.

She’s singling out each strand,

fingers over each again

and again

and again.

It starts at her head where there’s

a worrying bald patch—
a slash-and-burn of the fertile lands,

a growing field of emptiness.

A razing of the grounds decades premature

eradicating any kink

or curl

at odds with the natural smoothness

of her strands.

Every hair must be examined, inspected—eyebrows, eyelashes,

the fine hairs on her knuckles, her toes, each strand on her arms.

Not even her pubic hairs are safe.

What are you doing?

The question hangs, she can’t or won’t answer,
just keeps pulling out hairs.

She could spend hours pulling it out strand by strand,

despite the sun stealing away its light

or an ache in the fingers painfully

overworked. What lasts, some faint smile,

a twinge of perverse pleasure

as each plucked hair destroys

something disordered.
Why Does Niagara Fall?

I.

I know it’s a stupid question:
Water flows and the Earth breaks open,
the land cracks and splits uneven,
a house without steps,
and the water doesn’t stop flowing,
plummets off the ledge
falls over the ridge,
swan dives from the balcony
onto the rocks and dirt and Earth below.

Why doesn’t Water choose
the safer path, the slow
steady course down the hillside,
more gradual in its descent
no matter how steep
than to jump from a cliff.
Why does it belly-flop?
The smash of Water worse
than thunder, worse than
trees splintering, worse
than the empty echo of your call
in a cave. The body of Water that
breaks into a hundred thousand droplets
before they meet
again to make one body.

I want to slide quietly
down the hillside and slip
into Water whole,
unbroken, to open
myself under Water
and drink until
there is no need for the bravery
Water asks of me.

II.

I stand on the cliff edge
when the house of Earth
I thought could hold me
starts to crumble under my feet.

No better than stacking
paper cards to make a home.
Over the cliff I go to meet Water, 
splinter or fracture or flow, 
Air begs me to make 
a choice.

II.

I had thought my body 
a body of water. I had thought myself 
liquid, flowing, full of life. I had thought 
I felt the rush of fish a part of me, the ferns 
growing up along my arms, river grass my hair. 
And freefalling in air, an epiphany, 
I am not water.

No, my body too heavy, 
this wrong body. My torso not 
liquid, my legs and arms not fluid ripples, 
my feet and hands with no smell of mud, 
my toes not the fish, the frogs, 
wriggling on the edge of loose earth.

In freefall before the smack of water 
like a stone to shatter I know, 
I am no Water no Air no Earth, 
will be extinguished by the fall, 
will plummet, will be broken. 
Consumed by oily fear, my body 
liquid and resisting separation.
When Oil Meets Water

How should water move a body like me?

If I were a stone I’d be the kind
rooted to murky floors of ponds,
slick with algae film and the kind of sediment

left by Blue-spotted, Long-tailed salamander,
Red-eared Sliders, Eastern Painteds, Redbellies,
the dozens of unnamed minnows.

But I am not. So what does it mean
when the body is still and the water
doesn’t move, when this body is too afraid

to be jostled when the turtles, frogs and fish
climb and plop and swim, when the body
sticks slick and resists change?

What is it to be poison here. Unintended destroyer.

How like this body to think itself the center
when the Earth moves around it. But how
can it make apologies with no mouth to speak?

And how like this pool to not move
as the rivers and oceans think it should,
but to become a dusky blanket at its edges,

obscuring the sky. The trapped particles
of growing plants and decaying bodies
making a shroud of limbo within limbo.
Cicada Season

They’re chirping again. These cicadas that seem to leech the other sounds of summer. You’re bleaching the laundry again—*drawers, bedsheets, towels, all beside each other*—as if you could take out the sweat and stench of summer.

The cicadas have been roaring for days now. In your dreams you can hear only their song, cicada serenades stuffed into your ears. And when you open your mouth in sleep their empty husks spill out and swallow the space around your head.
Reflections in the Light of Doubt

Echoes of metallic clangs
A jury with no eyes, only mouths

in half-light
Everything shadowed in white

but half-light stills
Everything appears in white

like grey’s not a color
or the sound metal bars make

in houses where no one is home
Four walls in shadowed light

Yesterday I saw
a crow flying above

the barbs, over the heads
of houses and of little men with

their big guns pointed
into the crowd and

at the air above twelve
Sitting in two rows,

twelve men pointing guns
mouths and no eyes

all crow-speak but
without the right words

I painted the room silent white
trying to hush the sound of grey

trying to forget how
the crow flew yesterday

trying to forget
how

by mirror yesterday
I thought I saw a crow
This Poem is Not Meant for You

I am afraid to write. I am afraid of the pen, afraid of the paper. I am afraid of my mind. You are afraid of my mind. Each desire is made only of the hypothetical thread until these words make them real, imprinted on page.

I play with fire, I burn words into wood. You helplessly watch.

I am full of screaming. I am full of rot. The Earth burns, is on fire with my secret stench. How long until the police come, the firefighters, the secret maul to tear me to the ground. The length of a roar, of fear curling and catching on brown pine needles.

I am a tree growing on the roof of you.

I leech, grow fast and hard where you tell me not to, cover your clean slate with green and brown.

You are afraid of my mind. I am afraid of the paper I will become.
Mu

Meaning,
“Nothingness.”

Meaning,
“Empty.”

Meaning,
“Sheen of skin
stretched hipbone
to hipbone
like cling film.”

Meaning,
“Folds of unfilled fabric.
Forgotten flesh.”

Meaning,
“This body
becomes a perfect
shell shape
upon the bed.
A squished, soft,
pale pink
curled nautilus.”

Meaning,
“If you put
your ear
up just
to its mouth
where wisps of hair
blow and tickle
the cheek
you can hear
the echo
of the ocean
from its hollows.”
**When the Boy Ran for Freedom**

He ran towards the sliding glass door

thinking he could fly if he could

get past the pane

if he could get past the wire.

And he did break free,

burst through the pane and the frame and the wire

and woke up all in wire-cut cubes 1 X 1 X 1

except for his ears

which sliced at their irregular side-base and fell

neatly on the grass in their awkward shape and twitched

as they listened to the sound of his body coming down—

solid drops like hard rain

*patter-patters* on the

sidewalk.
Suicide Notes for Transgender Awakening

Throwing photo frames to watch them shatter after thirteen years of trial and failure with nothing left to do but write a note and choose the clothes I’ll be buried in after thirteen years after trial and failure.

Tonight, before my death, I cut my hair and choose the clothes I’ll be buried in.

No dresses, or skirts. No goddamn panties or bras.

Tonight before my death I’ll cut my hair and finally wear the clothes I want to. No more dresses, or skirts, no goddamn panties or bras. Tonight I burn alive, making past—making my future—

final. Wear the clothes I want to and when I look in the mirror I see someone else tonight. I burn. Alive, making the past my future, I imagine the prepubescent, breastless me

when I look in the mirror. I see someone else who shares my DNA, my history, but I imagine the prepubescent, breastless me and terror and excitement make holes in me.

Who shares me? My DNA, my history, but this no-name creature I watch, watching me. Terror and excitement make holes in me—What could make itself whole in me?

This no-name creature I watch watching me, infantile and not quite yet human, what could make itself whole in me, the embodiment of an endless, ravaged howl, infantile and not quite, yet human. Under the red-eyed exterior, tear-crusted shell, the embodiment of an endless, ravaged howl making itself known in broken glass mirrors.

Under the red-eyed exterior, tear-crusted shell, no-name breaking through photo frames, making itself known. In the broken glass mirrors I see a man alive.
II.
Breathing Fire

“You’ve always been afraid
of this. Heard the warnings,
watched for signs of dry things

under your feet about
to catch. You’ve eschewed pine needles
and brown leaves and friction,

hidden indoors from sunlight and woods,
come out only at the dearest
of hours, stayed on the concrete

where no one might
hold a flame and catch a fire in you.
Now you’re here. You’ve ventured

into the forest and your exothermic
feet make kindling of the forest
floor. It’s too late to head home,

change your mind.
When you fully catch and feel
the burning, flames licking legs, don’t run,

stay your feet, ground your
roots and be planted. This is what
it comes to, the pine needles to your

toes to your shins. Inhale, breathe it
depthily, hold your breath. By the time
you exhale you’ll have no need to. The growing

catch of fire in your lungs, the telltale
curls of smoke in your blood. Heat now
pools into the serpentine coils of your

intestines, the sac of stomach and gallbladder,
swells the tissue of liver and
kidneys and pancreas. A ring

of embers colors your eyes,
once blue, now black and red. You
are filled with forest fire.
From a safe distance the animals
look on, watching your body expand and grow. They
know the signs the destruction your body

foreshadows. That soon you will be
food for Jack pines and maples—even
for the far flung lavender fields

you’ll travel to on wind. Don’t
cry it out, let your insides boil and your
form explode. Bomb, scatter yourself into ash.
Ode to My Uterus

She crawls through my body as would a fly, freed from the sticky ceiling paper,

drag itself across the kitchen floor. How many years must I bear

this curse of womanhood? The ghost shell of my transsexual body

still hosting this female relic, parasite to the testosterone injected

into my thighs. She drags out her entrails across the scene.

Like the never-mother clutching her absent swell, and staggering to the toilet,

reaches a hand to the hem of panties to find her hands covered

in the warmth of syrupy drippings. Ghostling in the blood.

I too have committed myself to this manslaughter

as I have committed myself to a man’s laughter bouncing off the walls of my throat. I too am haunted I too know the wrath of my body, this body condemned to never know anything but emptiness. My hollowed space that screams as if the pain of this slow atrophy of muscle could make the empty seeds of my body take root in my soul.
Trans-Man Blues

I. At night

_for Linda_

when I wake in this body
I just don’t know what to do.

Flat where once there were breasts,
hippish that was once hipfull,

and of course
there will never be a penis.

There have been two lives to this body
and two lives for each of those lives.

This life now,
sleeping next to him, my lover,

I wish you could have known
this life, my life, now.

Would you approve?

Gay is fine, but I wonder
if some small part of you

would have been incensed
at my joining the sex

that had wholly disappointed you.

II. I was born a girl.

No, maybe that’s not right—
how can one be born one thing
to become another—
I am no caterpillar, no chrysalis, no butterfly.

Maybe I was just born.
Maybe I took my first steps

crawling through the muck
to become titless—

and can this word be mine
when I don’t even own
the damn things?
III. In a journal

I spend my mornings despondent, waking up dickless and groping in the emptiness, the bastard son. Appendages cut, despite my mother’s love, in spite of my father’s wish.

My days are grey truths in this world black-and-white. A concocted autobiography, mixed with lies, submerged in a murky spectrum with pronouns noncompliant and heart beating always half-terrified.

I drink coffee at midnight, gin at noon, reading history books, biology texts in my own holes in these walls, applying theories, natural laws to this suffering. Waiting for pitying saplings to sprout everywhere and nowhere in my soul, while I keep singing these Trans-Man Blues.

IV. At the edge of the clearing

Standing in the field watching the trees sway in the forest beyond on the edge where I stood, the sun caught the wild lines of the pine needles, turned them brown with the threat of fire. When I was a child I stood there contemplating God. My name meant, “He
who is like God.”
How desperately I wanted

to be a monk. And when
I could only be a nun

how quickly my wish
caught flame in the sun.
Transitions

“Oh. I’m sorry,” my sister tells me. “I never realized you felt that way.” My niece being bounced on her knees, her mother trying to stave off the impending wail from her upturned mouth. Transfigured into a perfect upside-down “U” no adult could ever hope to replicate. “Mom and I,” my sister says, “Still call you ‘she,’” and [name redacted] when we talk about the past. It makes more sense that way. The context of things.” She likes to think it could all be boiled down to context, to good intent. Like simple syrup boiled down into candy to put on my tongue. Easy way to pacify any childish protest. I may have. I tell her, “I understand.” But the truth grabs my throat, stays lodged there, swells stuck. I want to be unable to help but say, how I hated that girl. How I wanted to kill her. How I still would if I could. But the shame keeps me
from it all. From the words escaping my throat.

My family’s love anchor to my rage,

dragging it under the sweet, choking acquiescence.

“It makes me uncomfortable.”
The only words that can come out, explain, even if I could have said,

*It makes me not me. I was never that person, I don’t know how you can refer to us as being one in the same.*

*Who is the stranger you refer to in my absence?*

“I didn’t realize,” my sister says, nonchalant, nonplussed, still bouncing my niece on her knees.

No big deal.

My niece’s tiny fists still latched onto two of her fingers,
gripping in an infantile stranglehold. My niece’s mouth has stayed put in its perfect upside-down “U,” barely tethered to placidity, the almost wail so obviously graven into her face.

Only a few months old,
if she could understand,
I would explain to her

how I too know this moment.
I want to let her know

it isn’t candy in my throat,
it’s a choking hazard, it’s a tree knot, and

it understands how she feels.
Making of Battle Scars

The doctor dressed like a fox left a battle scar on my chest. One lump of fat left from my left breast he failed to find or remove when sucking out the fatty deposits God left by accident. The white crescent under each nipple, the pucker pocket under each armpit, they don’t speak like the little lump of leftover fat shrieks of where I’ve come from.

I sword-sliced away the reminders of someone. When the doctor smiled I could see my face in his polished canines, his teeth whiter than a wedding dress. I hung my mother’s wedding dress on my body once, laced it up and clasped all the little pearl buttons and led a parade around the house sewn up into it. Under my paper gown I wore the wedding dress to the surgery so the doctor could slice through it when he took off my breasts, so I could breathe without the collar around my neck and its failed marriage to female parts.

The way the scalpel cleanly severed the stitches, never snagging on the lace. And the good doctor cut me at each shoulder, cleaned me of each sleeve, each falling to the operating room floor with all the grace of silk. Then the doctor deskirted me. He sliced swiftly the hemline with the agility of his kind, so that it fluttered down more freely than when it hung around my trapped body. With the help of two nurses the doctor had me sit up for his finale. He had me turn around and I could feel the summers of his mouth on my back, rabbit blood and arrogance. He began at the small of my small back and slowly brought the scalpel up following the trail guide of my spine until at last he reached my neck and the largest button under the string closure of my paper gown. The scalpel like a hot knife went through the thread so fast the cut he left wouldn’t be noticed until much later, the rivulet of dried blood. Shudder and a sigh.

When he was done I was wet with relief.
The Body Goes Under, Breasts Removed

It’s funny,
the doctors and nurses

say air is fomenting here,
in my lungs

in my throat
in the tube

they will stuff down me
but when my chest

pumps up and down,
up and down,

I’ve never felt
so useless.

And when I wake again,
lying in the hospital bed

the doctors and nurses
tell me they found the problem:

I’m growing a world
inside of me

and in my lungs
there’s a mountain range and valley.

And they tell me,
in their detached way,

how the snow swirls
on the mountain peaks,

how elk graze on
my fertile green fields,

they think there may be
salmon in my streams.

There’s a storm coming,
they say,

the sky is grey,
the air fresh and thick.
A storm would close the throat,
the anesthesiologist says,
these are just things that happen
and are no fault of his
or anyone’s,
really.
With All These New Bodies

Aren’t you tired being told to be happy? Aren’t you tired being told you should be grateful for the self you once were? Joyful for God’s great accident, like Murphy’s Law was a joke the room of our kind was in on? Isn’t this what we prayed for? Isn’t this what we paid for? Here are the prescriptions: Tes-tos-ter-one, es-tro-gen, pro-geste-rone, blockers, parades of syringes, needles, pills, tests ad infinitum. The blood works. And that’s not accounting for the boob jobs, gy-ne-co-mas-tia, re-moved ar-e-o-las, clit extensions, dick inversions, “top surgery,” “bottom surgery.” The polite ways of saying, Nature told us, “Go fuck yourselves!”

Masks and markers, lines drawn over your body for you to be sawed open, pulled apart, and re-stitched as if you were made from words. As if the human body were as easily construct-ed as a sentence. A series of reassembled words and sounds. Reader, this is more than a lesson in composition. This is a lesson in our scars, how we were raked over and over again, trying to force something to grow in our barren fields, to write something in our empty pages, to erase from our hearts this song of misery and longing. This life is not an essay we can cut-and-paste, bubblegum pop poetry, or flower beds. This is a life of bodies pulled, hewn, excavated, exploded out from the shells born into that never bloomed.
Notes from the Workday, Rutgers Gardens, November 2015

My breath shines in the light.

Jobs are confined to a series of greenhouses. Decrepit, at the edge of the gardens that are not gardens. Toolsheds, plants grown for research, for experimentation, or uprooted and sold at fundraisers when no longer wanted.

Boss as brother-in-law, throwing temporary work my way. The first job given that proves I am a man. Brother-in-law is tired, sets me to work with the hollies left over from last year, leaves.

The hollies have been left where I find them. Long left. Gone wild. They’ve broken through plastic sheeting meant to protect them. Begun to dig their own way into the ground, plant their roots themselves in the earth.

These hollies are screaming with joy, taking their first breath of real air, finally making an imprint on the world.

If I know anything, it’s that I know nothing about gardening. Know nothing about being a man. But it seems wrong to uproot these carbon bodies finally alive, forcing their own course in their evolution.
After the Boy is Born

He must relearn to live
according to the rules
of his new sex.
He is still bound to those
old rules, the ones
he was taught as a little girl.
Be polite. Be kind. Accept
compliments from strangers.

He knows the definition of “boy”:
snips, snails, rodent tails,
blood, and the sticky slime of plasma,
violent fights and late nights,
sexual conquests whose sex
and gender are no longer important.

Limes and gin—hold the tonic,
this is a chronicle of this boy.
This boy who is happy, ready to be careless,
carefree, for his first time,
who feels the sun on his face,
his back. Bare-breasted for the first time.
That first time he is conditioned
still self-conscious, ready to be yelled at
for daring to bare a nipple in public.
Thank God for the Sun

The sun smells, tastes like freedom.

Happiness is a body warmed by sun, 
a body free from cinching
and pinching of the binders made
to hide the burdens of pubescence.
Even tiny these breasts have been a burden.

Laying down in a field on
my left side
I listen to my heart—
the way it beats this way
closer to the surface
than when I lay on the right.

The steady rhythm
more than the medical monotone—
the sound of life.
And the steady wave
that crashes over again
under my hand,
pulsating as if it too feels the sun,
and rolling on my back
free of breasts my heart beats
as if it was warmed for the first time.
III.
Scrubbing, the Bathtub Book of Prayer
  -To all my fallen trans* sisters-in-arms

How strange it is to think
this is all your body
coating the porcelain walls
in a dirty film.

The beige gunk that accumulates
on the rough side of the sponge.
This is my body
being washed down the drain.

Sediment of my body
scratched off with the sponge,
and fingernails,
when normal efforts
won’t do the trick.

Men, media,
the morality hypocrites
afraid to let you pee
in peace—they forget people like me.

They’ve never sunk
into dirty bathwater
to watch the way their old cells,
oils, odors, long since shed,

rise to float on the water,
how they cling to the tub when drained.
They only draw fantasies—
obsessions over your frame.

I know why all those men
beat you, rape you, kill you—
a woman they don’t expect.
Your bodies threaten them.
Your histories too.

But womanhood—
no matter the form—
always is a threat
to these kinds of men.
Even without words,
we know who they are—
the hatred in their eyes
always over your shoulder.

Our, yours and mine,
statistics of transition
played out so differently—
I was made to feel safe.
You were taught to be safe.

My risk of assault
went up and down—greater
than a ‘regular’ man’s,
but still on par with women.

Each one of you was told
cold numbers, graphic details
of true crimes that will never
wash cleanly from your mind.

You learned exponential
increase in potential
for a young and violent death—
how many more transwomen
were beaten that year. Raped. Murdered.

We should have been able
to lift you from the tub,
gather you like a babe
in our arms and press our lips
in blessing to your forehead.

A totem to keep you safe,
free, and even happy.
I wish I could pass
my blessing to you—

kiss your forehead,
bestow my good fortune—
if we can call it such.
I wish I could wipe the blood off you.

But I can only kiss
the candles
before I light them.
Only hold that moment
of silence as each year
marks another wave of the dead,
and scrub the tub filled
with my tears, and your blood,
and our skin.
Chameleons

Will steal your language—
their long tongues unfurl,
take your words to make them their own;
I know because I have often been one,
a chameleon,
have often stolen syntax and vocabulary;
turns of phrase not native to my mouth
have awkwardly fallen out
obviously foreign
to my linguistic sense and
it stands to reason that chameleons
will do this too
seeing as they are
the sort that steals what they can
with their long-grasping, free-flying,
thief-sticky tongues,
even stealing logic
and confounding us when they
don’t blend into backgrounds
by color but with emotion.
There is no reasoning with chameleons,
they have no sacred sense
of communication—
ask a chameleon for help,
a little verbal assistance,
and they will only roll
each eye three hundred
and sixty degrees in opposite directions.
They won’t even bother
to flick out their
native tongue lazily if asked—
they only like to snatch words
like bugs from leaves.
So when I am wordless
I make a trip
to the nearest zoo.
Watch them,
tap mindlessly for hours
on the glass
housing them.
Wishing that I could
hate them more
than love them, than feel
the green emoting
like the color of their skin,
relaxed in their habitat.
Awkward, ugly creatures,
eyes twitching constantly,
opposite directions.

It’s impossible

for a man like me

to do anything else

but watch, grudgingly respect,

love,

these animals

who unlike any other

take and eat the words they want

and flush them out

onto their skin for the world to see.
The Last Bullfight

I.

I have never seen a bullfight but I have played them over and over in my head.

The bull running, pierced again and again by the elegant swords of the matador. Only a little blood trickles out through each wound, but each rivulet becomes a stream, and all the red grows until the bull is soaked in red and its hooves leave wet impressions as the dust clumps stained with its blood.

The bull starts raging, thrashing his head side to side, pulling his neck and straining so that the tendons and veins press so hard against the flesh I think they might tear apart and the whole head might fly off of the great beast across the arena, into the lap of some lucky boy or girl. But it stays attached and the bull kicks its legs up, first front then back, in a primal and wild madness, as though daring the princely matador, in his festive dress of magenta, saffron, and gold, dotted with poofs and pom-poms, to come closer, to pierce again.
II.

We never go to bullfights. Instead we sit in a Mexican restaurant in sunny Mission Beach, San Diego,

where there’s a painting on the wall of a matador standing over the dead bull, a slippered foot on the neck of the defeated,

departed creature, and the sopapillas here are almost as good as the ones I’ve told you about, the ones we passed just outside Mesa Verde. And I’m imagining you’re not talking with your mouth full of honey and pastry,

but the sweetness has made your mouth sour, the unheard words from you smell rancid as turned leche,

ignoring me ignoring you while you lick the stuck doughy bits from your fingertips. Your hands

look like they’re made of sugar, so delicious I grab one, pull it to my mouth. Your fingers taste sweet

with nectar and the sourness of your saliva mixing in my mouth. Your other hand joins my face in a sudden and hard caress that leaves a clap in the air, a stickiness in the grain

of my second day shadow stubble. People watch us carefully. The waitress with bean stains and tomato water on her dress dyed like turquoise, Southwest skies, balances a tray of plates on her full belly, but doesn’t come closer to question us, “Is everything okay here?” Or, more likely complain, “Don’t make me get the manager.”
The hush and still lasts only
as long as the sound of your slap,
but even as they all resume, eat again,
ignore the two of us, we wait
to press “play” again. Your hands long gone
unlike the sting. Only you, wiping your hands
with the brown napkins. Vigorous.
Forceful. To clean off some dirtiness
I’ve left on them. And my cheek
has warmed all the sopapilla honey
you gave me. So it starts to run
down my face in a little stream,
dripping onto the Formica table top,
smelling of bean paste and plastic.
I place a paper placemat where the honey
drips, prod and poke the spots
to make dark and wet impressions.
Orange

There’s an orange on the table for you to get you through this muddy season.

I know we left things on a note of uncertainty.
Disordered Love Story

I. I know I can be dramatic.

II. Exoneration is that word. Like you, I’m carrying some burden. Like me, you’ve carried some burden. You’ve always been burdened. It’s the secrets that get the better of us. Not the things, just the feeling that we’re smuggling our evil self out under our coats past the loving eyes of someone we want to think better of us.

III. Because. Before. Some small part resisted that word. “Dirty.” I knew better. I knew I was a little bit better than that. Or maybe I just hated my lovers always a little more than I hated myself. Maybe I’m just a little worried I don’t deserve this. And maybe I’m a little worried that you’ll think I don’t deserve this either, if you know who I am. Who I’ve been.

IV. I’m standing in front of the mirror, looking at my reflection and it’s nothing new but it’s always new. Now there’s a darkness somewhere in that visage, something that wasn’t capable before now is, and culpable too. This is what love is. Or maybe, this is just what love does to me.

V. But now, now there’s the y. Now I’m not dirt. Now I’m dirty. And I’m dirty because you love me. The dirt like grease, the oily film of old unwashed skin. For the only time in my life, I wish I had waited. I want you to outshine everyone that came before you. I want you to want that too.

VI. For the first time, I feel dirty. Dirty in a different way than I felt before. When lovers told me I was dirty before I felt like it, not so much because of all the past lovers that had visited my bed before them, not what they accused me of. Slut. I felt dirty because I was with them. I felt dirty because I looked into their faces. I looked at the sneering lips and the scowling brows and I knew I deserved no better. I was only dirt.

VII. I don’t want these shadows. This threat of nightmare.
Watching You Dance

You look free. Not just free

but in a way I didn’t think I’d see. You’re smiling a different

smile

than the one I’m used to.

It’s not about grace.
Your erratic movements. The uncertain feet and arms.

It’s about un-inhibition

in the most unlikely of places. The suit, black vest, green tie &
patent leather shoes,

the ballroom, the crowded floor with one hundred bodies

crammed into twenty square feet.

It’s not at all like you
but you seem comfortable here.

A few minutes ago, again a few minutes from now,

we’ll be the only two men dancing

arm in arm on the parquet floor. Trying to find the least
awkward way
to mash together two sets of confused arms and feet. Navigating a room of

looks

we’re getting used to receiving.

When did you become this way?
When did you acquire this ease

navigating the world,
this wedding where you are only a guest,

like a stage whose marks you are bound to meet.

An actor stepping seamlessly to each spot,

invisible predetermination rehearsed

before anyone arrived here.

But it’s an illusion painted by your comfort here. I’m only so familiar
with your normal comfort-negative state, this display
is completely spontaneous.

Watching from fifteen feet away, planted in my chair, sends trills along
my web of nerves,
drawn up to my brain.

Autonomy.

Joy.

Your body explodes
with more expression than I’ve ever seen before.

Curve of your mouth,
the upside-down wide-arched grin.

Bearing your teeth at the world,
at the dancers on your stage
in some playful kind of dominance,
confidence dragged up by the heels.
You have no need of a dance partner here,
no arm to guard you against the world,

but I’ll wait at the edges
until you long for one again.
Lovers Learn to Howl Their Names

Floor wet and dirty we learn
our names in the language
of bodies. I could call you
*Hip-thrust, Long-lashes,*
*Cuticle-bite, Honey-eyes.*
You could call me *Teeth-grit,*
*Open-mouth, Clit-dick, Cock-lust—*

I lap your up skin like salt lick.
Look to find what caress
will make the dormant vines
resting outside the rusted-shut windows
want to invade us. Call it *Common,*
call it *Jasminum-officinale,*
we know it as *Poet-jasmine—*

it blooms like we do—falsely
innocent in virginal white.
A heady scent that betrays
want, desire. I want to come
with you buried in jasmine.
Your tongue penetrates the open space
of my mouth. The vines tap

at the window panes—our tongues
meet and outside the twinings
dance as they unlatch the frames
and slip inside like your hair
between my fingers, like fists
of leaves—ready, one two three!—
thrown in the air and you fall

around me. We bleed, moment
with movement, our existence—
in waves the way flowers bloom:
sweat, tears, semen secretions.
We smell of the unspoken sins
mothers warn children about—
the Holy vulgar musk of bodies

wanting into need. The heat
between us is cata-lust—
catalyst for all living things.
Here we’re mightier than God.
Now tell me about the ether
between here and heaven.
Of My Life

My father slips in and out, pantomime of *something* he *was.*

“It’s been awhile”—we never say, never acknowledge.

On the telephone he is an old man, voice aged and tired

by a lifetime of disappointments.
This is not what he thought his life would be.

His failing marriage, my stability,
our roles inverted and reversed.

He says in vagaries, *You’re too old to be my child, I’m too burdened to be your father. This weight is heavy, son,* *can you lift it off me?*

I don’t know how
to be my father’s father.

And my father’s father is already dead, and can’t tell me

how to raise my dad.
Objective of Simplicity

I.

It’s easy to rid a house of things. There goes the furniture out onto the lawn under half moon. Then the throw pillows we’ve never used (and what could be their point?). Then the winter clothes we won’t need in a land of eternal sun. Next we’ll get rid of Fall’s clothes, of Spring’s, away with even the bareness of our summer things—a few boxers (mine patterned with skulls, four leaf clovers, anchors & ships with sails, flags of the world, yours plaids of red, blue, and gold) and the undershirts in two sizes (His and His). We charge room through room—you toss out the guitar I’ve never learned to play, I throw away the blanket we’ve made love on, which you’ve never remembered to wash. Through the passing night crickets sing the opera of our things cascading onto the lawn until the first light when there are tables, mirrors, the clothes, computers, cellphones tossed ceremoniously into waste cans, the photo albums of ex-lovers, ex-friends, shoes, toothbrushes, food we pretend we’ll never need given or eat again. And at high pink morning we’re laying in our bed not even in our underthings, staring at the empty ceiling. Breathless in our empty home we’ll wait until late afternoon, until the cicada chorus drives us from here both too full, unable to say what brought us.
II.

Let’s make base camp here, where there’s a clearing against the forest behind us. Even as I enter a room to clean it, I find my possessions already know their end is nearing. Or were they your things, I wonder. Like fearing no ownership means the soul has no place to lie or maybe the soul can’t lie. And that’s my burden and yours, too. Just as is hearing,

“In rooms I often find myself alone.”
Or is that the same as saying I often find myself alone. Or alone, I often find myself. So alone together we pull air into our lungs praying we find more than ourselves in our core.

III.

Good morning. Or that’s what I’ll say, Good morning, lover, when you come back to me from prisons of dreaming, from the soft retreat inside yourself.

Last night came the rain, washing the earth clean, cleansing minds of madness, but we kept our heads covered in our tent throughout the night, and maybe we haven’t lost yet our insanity. Or maybe our madness was the sanity. When we walked to the woods unafraid of what ideas God-uncertain infused in us—

like swirls of paint into buckets of water ready to be drunk or dunk our naked selves in, temporary tattoos for memories

for how a few minutes of going fist-to-fist with Grand Cosmos alters us eternally. We’ll remember. And forget. Remember again when I tear the soft petals of your flesh between my teeth, when we force blueberry impressions in each other’s backs thrusting into the white space of the plane between here and heaven.
The stubble shadow grown during the storm under my fingers warms and your breath the gentle swell. With this idea in my head I make rings for your fingers.
When God Calls Us Back to the Sea

This is the last stop. Whatever we left
now comes before us, whatever ahead
some place we’ve already been. When God calls us
we stand side to side, hands almost touching.

You must accept it. Have some dignity.
Let the waves come crashing down over us
as we march into the sea. This is where
the world ends. Don’t cry, this is not

a mournful tune. This is where you will swim
for eternity. Let the rubber factories fall.
Let the coal crumble into the roaring
waters. No more need for uranium.

Forget the moon. Forget the people who
came before you and the ones who will
never come. And as we march forward, swallowed,
our lips will hold God’s uttering. No shouting

but a steady cry, a decree of love
directed to our devils. You will not
have us. And finally we will be
humanity, more human than we’ve ever been.