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# THE KEEPING HOUSE

THE KEEPING HOUSE

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Bachelor of Arts, Marlboro College, Marlboro, Vermont, 2015

Thesis

Presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements  
for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts  
in Poetry

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ABSTRACT

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Title: *The Keeping House*

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This collection of poems and short prose is a meditation on questions of boundary and perception. *The Keeping House* is locus of loss and entrapment, resistance and desire. It embodies the irresistible gravity of the self—both its material and psychical spaces. The speaker grapples with the instability of a world where “shrouds become things, and things become shrouds.” Even knowledge is unreliable. These poems enact a quest for meaning through internal and external landscapes.

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## I. SHROUDS BECOME THINGS

## A PARABLE

There was a time when every page spoke  
in clear flashes to the parable her life:  
stumbling backstage to find the musicians  
distorted by proximity and ordinary language,  
free of the blinding light and sound of themselves.  
How to dream again with all the radiant music?  
That night in the kitchen a bag of white rice spilled  
the instant of the unforgivable thought.  
The door locked. The outer world playing dead,  
a clock with the second hand snagged, ticking,  
eternally, its second. How to live in a country  
of merely possible lives? Surrendered to the motion  
of the bus, her face a familiar question, warping  
in the glass. The woman in a knitted shawl  
on the magazine cover glowingly recommended  
*modesty*. The unsteadiness of a resolution,  
like dirt rubbed in the heart. But real.  
And the crows insisting she get up.

## THE KEEPING HOUSE

I spend my days in chasing dust.  
And really couldn't ask for more  
than *floccules, feather, cloud, and rust,*

or sand and pollen, thread and crust  
the washrag caught on golden floor.  
I spend my days in chasing dust,

strayed particles, a future crushed—  
after have and hope flew out the door,  
*floccules, feather, cloud, rust,*

the grit of dreams and ragged trust,  
a shrapnel love left after war  
frets my days with chasing dust.

When you left, I stood untouched—  
I found your things in dresser drawers  
turned to *floccules, feathers, rust...*

If a million days and nights combust  
and sea makes desert of its shore,  
still I'll dream of chasing dust,  
*floccules, feather, and floating rust*

## RATIONS

For how long can I subsist  
on so little?

Drawn by a glimmer  
of history through the salted dark—

jerking awake at the oars, wasted  
on a diet of herring and terns.

At the prow the captain stares  
across the cold glass of the sea.

His face hardened by the great light.  
Every act, every sacrifice is a strategy.

He issues provisions from the barrels  
of dry milk and sugar, knowing the cost,

knowing the taste restores strength  
to hunger, though the unbearable

sweetness can flare only in ice,  
exiled as I am from pleasure.

Season after season,  
the island floats ahead

or behind me—  
always in the distance.

## BEFORE WE HAD HOURS

### I.

The jacket on the back of my door had become a witch overnight, the hood peaked into a crooked nose, two hollowed eyes leering darkly from the folds. I lay safely under the covers, unable to move. April light the color of daffodils flooding the room.

It wasn't real, of course, but even then I knew the most terrifying things are not real.

I would be late for school. I thought of you watching Mister Rogers in the living room, the TV reflected on your glasses, your mouth slack. Of course you were the answer. Relieved, I called to you. You would never know I had been afraid, I would bound up when you opened the door obliviously breaking the spell.

I called again. And again, louder.

### II.

Your fascination with fire began by accident. What happened while you were playing in the front seat of the old station wagon? Matches and leaves and theories. It could of course have been mechanical. Flame bursting from the hood. Dad with buckets of sand, screaming for you. Only when sirens reel through the woods and firemen thud into the yard, shouting, you appear at the corner of the house with a plastic shovel.

Years later, I lie awake in bed, wondering: is this the night you finally burn down the house?

### III.

I blame you for the hearts on the wall but Mom says you can't draw that well. I fill the cracks on the table with blue pen, and she sends you to time out. Guiltily I watch you staring down from the loft; you don't know what you've done wrong. One day we walk to Nancy's, only to find an empty house. In revenge we slip through the glass door and steal a picture of Alexandra. Gap-toothed, in a silver frame.

Months later on their front deck, Mom finds the frame in your pocket, her surprise turning to horror. She apologizes to Nancy. You look to me; I am the only one who speaks your language.

IV.

You are Hansel, scouting stones in the night. Holding out a chicken bone. I am cast as Gretel. Sometimes also the witch, shrieking into the oven. As the woodcutter, you sob into my shoulder when I return home. *What happened to you I thought you were dead.* Pushing your glasses up your nose. Then you want to play again.

Again in the woods we wait for our parents who have abandoned us.

V.

In the days before hours you are just my brother. Unable to smile for the camera without scrunching your eyes closed. The stiff cold kitten on the patio you have loved to death. Mom insists that because I am your sister you can never marry me. Your high whine, bright slurred question after question. You watch *Mary Poppins* over and over every day until the tape breaks.

VI.

Dad has the conversation first with you. A different one with me. I will never know your version. But now I am permitted to hit you back when you hit me. And I have words to explain why you strike out, and talk the way you do, why you still wet the bed. Why you still sit in the baby seat on Dad's bicycle, while I rattle alongside on my training wheels. I have words for your screechy voice. Your crooked legs. Your ripping the pages out of my books. I know the words the world has for you. And the polite way to say them. Though I must never speak these to you. Someday you will know, too, you will always be this way.

Which you always have been without being—

Anyway it's no fun playing tag when you're around.

You're the easy It. And you stay It.

VII.

The margins of sleep become a space of *you or me*.

If it's only make-believe. If you're just pretending. Everyone else in the world is in. The secret

I must keep from you is a lie. You are all playing a trick—

And I am the one penned out, on the wrong side of the knowing.

FANTASY MATERIAL a little male bird of the species  
who loves to fight: at the bottom of a cage in the mind,  
amidst shattered egg décor. A fire-feathered feeling  
bird who sings in the fault of thought. Have you heard  
this song in another bird of the species who loves to fight.  
When imaginary enemies play-fight the bird in the imaginary  
cage, a rupture of jewel-colored chemicals is the treasure.  
*Half understood.* And time is young, sweaty as an experiment.

## PRIVACY

It was weeks before she saw the couple  
who had taken the apartment downstairs.  
But she began to notice a man on the street  
who would smile without looking at her.  
Then a girl appeared on the porch, asking,  
had she seen a Tarot deck? She knew  
their names from the box on the porch.  
And came to crave the muffled sound  
of television through the floor, a lull  
between the fights. These usually started  
with sharp voices after dinner and ended  
around midnight in moans. In the morning  
a consort of birds in oaks around the house  
woke them all. Coffee brewing, a fried egg  
scent through the vents, and then the front door.  
Their greenish drapes were always closed.  
One day, she came home in the rain to find  
clothes she'd forgotten on the line folded  
neatly in a basket outside her door. At first  
she was puzzled about the missing clothespins,  
but discovered them later that evening  
when the rain stopped, with her underthings,  
untouched on the line.

FROM TIME TO TIME AN ORIGINAL LIKENESS  
REVEALS ITSELF

Crushed grass in the field an animal's sleep—

the ground still warm. I hunt the other version,  
the thing eager and insular, disappearing

with a kind of blindness

through immense territory. Another  
lightless flickering, another song.

The circular motion brings me around to

where I started. Madness from a god: wings.  
The hope of remembering myself is slipping.

Still, the spirit dozes on the shelf, apparent

in daylight, a circle of absent dust.  
The animal has a quiet view of reality—

in daylight,

be restored. Finer than where I started.  
Through immense territory

with a kind of blindness,

the thing eager and insular, disappearing.  
The ground still warm. I hunt the other version,

crushed grass in the field, an animal's sleep.

## THE ORCHID ROOM

1.

Children dizzied in the orchid room  
apprentice themselves to its beauty—  
It moves outward and inward at once, this motion.  
It is like pretending to oneself to be in love.  
    An exaggeration in certain words and motions  
    represents a confusion of altitude.

2.

Psyche faltered in the dark bedroom,  
the humming interior  
immeasurable as the wilderness.  
Now she can't even name what has been lost.  
    And though these labors leave no mark on the earth,  
    shrouds become things; things become shrouds.

3.

Someday I will know the length of these panes,  
end to end. The shallow whorls of blue and gold  
will shatter; the heart will ripen on its great white stalk.  
Now the room lies quiet, the world its dust.  
    On certain evenings the horizon  
    singes into the earth, and everything stops breathing.

## LAUNDRY AT DAWN

With each shape betraying mine,  
worn through a week of dim earth, I rinse  
the clothes to exhaustion, hands numb.  
Done. The spiritless rags slow-dripping  
on the line. The water a pink smog  
of Indian dye. In the stone stairwell  
a strange gift of daylight leaking through.  
What have I learned? The order  
of companionship is a vocabulary  
I stumble over. The meaning behind  
all faces passed in the street  
miscomprehended.  
To be landless in a land of rain  
on cobbled rooftops: hours and names  
falling away, and what bearings  
I might have imagined,  
obsolete as the constellations.  
This morning the wet village  
disperses the cloud, and women  
cast rooftops with fresh laundry.  
In vague familiar shapes their faces  
tinged by that shifting corridor, the sky.

WHY WORRY over omens. Auspicious or otherwise.  
Clumsy transitions, tripping on *to be*. The heliosphere  
shrinks to the black trap of a womb, and an omniscient  
narrator suggests a kindness: sleepwalkers lucid-dreaming,  
water sweating through the crack in a glass. The day's lyric  
opposes linearity, and I will trust the grain of sand  
in my eye. The accidental distances my glance lands on.  
I will think of thought as an action that invokes.

# PARABLES

Have you ever buried someone who *feels* like your brother, who would be the physical embodiment of your image of self if your image of self was a brain in a locked car trunk, the car battering the guard rails of an endless bridge. The brain interprets the sound of the water below as a large pit of gnashing animals. Feels itself bruised against a lawless alien skull. Yet the brain does not believe it is dreaming. It grips the dream and clenches against it with equal ferocity.

As the dreamer, they say, every aspect of the dream is you. The bloody garden gloves. Stairs into the caves. The police and what they will find, the body in a garbage bag under the packed dirt floor.

Do I fear punishment? I swallow garbage bags. Clenching my gut like a door. Wringing the gloves. Like mirrors, faces glint with condemnation. Although I cannot remember the act of murder, I know what it means to have been a killer. Someone has sentenced me to this \_\_\_\_\_.

My brother Daniel lives in a hunting cabin with rotating care providers and an aging chinchilla hunkered at the bottom of a cage. He wants to hold the chinchilla. On his lucky days, it nibbles the end of the carrot he offers through the bars. He has always wanted to hold things. To feel a small heart beating close to his. Just now I typed *hard* when I meant to type *heart*. He does not like anything other than animals to touch him. When I visit, he likes the attention of my hug but immediately flinches back. Half-way through our time he begins asking when he will see me again. Behind his face is a scream that has never been screamed. A rat drowning inside him when some kid on the playground says retard. He pushes his glasses back up his nose. A glare of light. In the lenses the two transparencies that are me.

If the police figure heavily in your dreams, according to dreammoods.com this signals you must put an end to your reckless behavior. Or you need to honor your commitments. You are rejecting rules, refusing the consequences of your actions. Alternatively, you may be overly policed in waking life. Do you hold yourself to herculean standards? At social functions, do you find yourself cast as the monochromatic 'nice girl'? Have you ever tried to eat a donut in handcuffs? Such factors must be considered in the interpretation of a dream; each individual carries his or her own personal symbology, based on a unique life experience. Thus the clues provided by any specific dream can be read only through and into your own 'reality.'

As a teenager I was terrified of police. Even when they would have no cause to suspect me, I froze at the sight of their stiff uniforms. Surely the dogs could sniff out the crimes of my conscience. A rat in the pipes. The night of the holding cell I found myself trapped in a landscape abstracted from the earth. Like an elevator in which you could be a mile underground, or a hundred. I wanted it to smell dirty, like bodies or urine, anything to anchor me in a lineage of people who had lain with their spines digging into the narrow wooden bench, eyes clenched against frigid white light, waiting for the steel door to bang open. But it smelled like nothing. I imagined the holstered police in the maze of the department like robots. Programmed by a box of scrolls that had been stamped by a mechanical hand centuries before I was born. Somewhere beyond the white brick walls and the network of locks, the world must be breathing. Asleep in bed. I had fallen into a box where nothing could reach. Minuteless hours of white brick. Brine tightening the skin around my eyes. Then suddenly noticing the absence of sound. The maddening insulation.

In *Gravity and Grace* Simone Weil describes falsehood as an armor that protects the unfit qualities of the individual from time's Darwinian elimination. *A phagocytosis in the soul: everything which is threatened by time secretes falsehoods in order not to die, and in proportion to the danger it is in of dying. That is why there is not any love of truth without an unconditional acceptance of death.* The worst of my behaviors were not illegal. I became a liar by necessity the year I developed anorexia. The radical betrayal that characterized both of these disorders became a way of life; looking outward to what was desired of me rather than inward to find what was true, I established residence in the periphery: the outermost sheath of being.

Fact or fiction. Only in costume could we exist. Building a mansion with toy hammers.

The only pet I have kept as an adult was a snail named Vera. She came ‘free with purchase’ in a bunch of chard from the co-op. It was December; release would have meant execution. Initially, she lived in a glass teapot with a bed of bok choy and a dish of water, but she spent all day wedged into the spout. Caught by her shell. Stretching her giraffe neck and gummy horns toward the free air.

Would it be more upsetting if every mental object of the world contained in itself a secret code we can never decipher, or if everything is exactly what it seems? What if a dream is only the rendition of a dream?

The Witness. Only a person who holds the vision of another more sacred than her own would tell a lie. Or act in a manner that compels untruth. The liar refuses the notion “everything in the dream is you.” She who lies to her neighbor to avoid death of face becomes twice divided from truth. The return to truth requires a willingness to see.

In dreams I rarely see my body. Perception without a pocket. Yet winding down the spiral stairs, my sense of boundary exerts itself, more radically than in waking life. My dream-self struggles through the images of the dream—a ruined bridge, a door that won't lock, a man climbing on a roof—believing itself to be distinct from these objects of experience. But in sleep I am two selves. Projecting a world to inhabit through the night, a dream-sphere from which I am exiled: a mental image in a field of mental images, a creator who cannot control her creation. The police cut a hole in the garbage bag for the boy's mouth. The man breathing in the deep water will strangle me. And I move through the dream without will, or with prescribed will. A doll that wants what her child-player wants her to want.

But in the morning I need to figure out the murder. What have I done that forced me to feel this death bleeding in my heart. If you have ever woken to a day stained with your own guilt, you know the sudden lightlessness of light. The dismal whine of the kettle; the tumultuous winter river; mental smog that pollutes your world as compellingly as the material version.

After Vera was moved to the aloe plant in my bedroom, she became a free wheel. Sometimes I delivered her daily salad to find her scrunching through the perlite, or glued to a toothy leaf. But other days she was nowhere to be found. As my search expanded outward, from the folds of the monstrous plant to the hard underbelly of the table to the dust-caked baseboard, I had the growing terror that if I didn't find her, she would later in the day find me: a crunch and then a slimy lump under my sock. Meanwhile, she was involved in a hero's journey. Crossing chalky plateaus and varnished wood. I would finally find her little brown wagon, inching along a window frame on the other side of the apartment, fathoms from the oasis she had been sequestered to. On our side of the window, the home she sought did and did not exist.

On the wrong side of the glass. Before he was transformed into the Beast, the Prince had believed himself beautiful. *Wishes in folklore: what makes wishes dangerous is the fact that they are granted.*

Daniel is directing a performance of *The Beauty and the Beast*. His actors are struggling to memorize their lines. To be inhabited by the script, as they negotiate the stacked cardboard boxes of village and castle. Daniel will play the Beast Prince, a dual role with which he is familiar. At home, when his perseverance takes a bad turn he is visibly transformed: face inflamed, eyes glassy red, voice balled into a strangled fist. His attacks side-swipe even the most seasoned professionals, for he becomes possessed by a feral intensity. Yet on the edges of an episode's heat, he can sometimes be reached by the recitation of a question he has himself asked: *Where is the good Daniel?*

Although the Beast's transformation appears as easy as removing a mask (the Prince inherently indwelling beneath the fur), we know that it involves more insidious labor. The petals of time drifting snow-like to the earth, as he rages against his own unrealized wish. It seems as if success depends on the love of a person beyond his control, but *Beauty* is merely the garden of himself, from which he has been exiled. She cannot be seduced.

In fairy tales the internal is made external: the stepsisters' slovenly faces signal the corruption of virtue, and every stepmother, in her callous ambition, fails against the wide-eyed innocence that makes the heroine "the fairest of the land." Spiritual beauty in these tales provokes grace of form; we learn to identify goodness as a visible feature. And yet, if we measure the hag by her warty nose, turn our back on a beggar rattling his bowl, or make an empty promise to the lowly toad, we will surely be punished.

According to Buddhist teachings in the Wheel of Time, the Kalachakra, the individual's outer world is conceived into being from emptiness, or potential, through each minor act. My subconscious response to the word "act" is an act. The visible landscape of any life reflects the inner, but it is always a projection of the past. Even the invisible landscapes of thought and imagination that arrive on the empty stage of consciousness have been cast by our actions. Yet the mind's tangible and intangible projections are of equal consequence: while most effective in the dark, glitter only glitters if there is light.

Weil says that to be exiled from appearance is to be rooted in reality. To be rooted in appearance is to be exiled from oneself. What well of mystery remains hidden because I believe the stories the skin tells? In fairy tales the primitive hot spring of the universe boils beneath all manner of disguise.

\*\*\*

## CONFUSED DIVINATION

The value of sacred substance  
and ritual became apparent  
after the universe began to  
communicate with stray hairs

## POSSESSION

The spirit waited  
behind the locked glass door  
of a woman's reflection.  
The happy carnage of her vanities  
is like wilderness,  
or the busy continuum  
of imagination and its body  
gnawed down to  
the sinew of an image. Frail house,  
tilting empty and anemic  
through the night, you know the grossest  
trepidations are the most manageable.

## THE GREAT BEAST

### I.

Like language coaxed from coltish minds I grow,  
and as I grow I gain in strength and lose  
in mind. I can't conceive relationship,  
mistaking maid for mistress as the prince  
confused by doctored clothes, a twist of light  
and shadow thrown on rocky walls to show  
the relative as absolute. To rise  
the hungry worm unravels hungry moth.

### II.

Of elements exerting gravity,  
as avarice: all gold belongs to me.  
My order is power to the blind  
ambition. Passions inspired by the prince,  
celebrities, and people with prestige  
endow my name but not my heart with love:  
though lacking soul, I stand on countless legs.  
I am the realm that will not be redeemed.

### III.

A Pharisee is someone virtuous  
in obedience to me and mine.  
When labeled as divine my license gives  
intoxicating cocktails, the *ersatz*  
of truth: I am transcendent in my way.  
To meditate on me is purity;  
the limits of my reach—loneliness.  
My antidote: that steeped herb, solitude.

## II. THE LOST WORLD

RED SPACE, SILK BLADES, moon dust.  
I didn't know why I had come so far. Standing  
in the open door, to let the world funnel through.  
If water catches in an empty glass, and you drink it.  
If a hand lifts, and a stranger on the sidewalk asks  
for something. If the world is anything but coming  
and going. Turning back to a sudden future. Wind,  
the earth reeling beneath me. Then the girl who fell  
on the playground, dragged behind the roundabout by  
her shoelace. Arms clenched over her face. An orbit  
of tiny stones. A week later the roundabout uprooted.  
A wound in the field. A retribution. I had clung to  
the rusted handles. Sucked into the spin. Now, here,  
somewhere between Bangalore and the Indian Ocean.  
Flying into space without obstacle. In my journal I  
cross out long passages. Is history only what settles in  
the sieve? White egrets swallowed by rivers of sunlight.  
The body a worn, empty saddle. Nothing is disturbed.

## THE LOST WORLD

A face had stirred in the garden statuary,  
now marbled by fire and mossy rain.  
A stone arm pointed a hand into the shrubbery,  
into the stammering wood. Desire remained  
at the origin, as I realigned with the natural  
world, churning without distinction.  
Distinct and shapeless as a feeling, you are never  
diminishing, in blossom under a dome of glass.  
Now we can be reached but not recognized,  
and the dead rise from the muscular ground.  
Unmemorized, in the seasoned newness  
between trees, the islands having shifted  
in that blackening sky, burned through emptiness.  
Sunbirds unwired and loose in the leaves.

I USED TO ADMIRE HER, *Voyager*. Going somewhere. Innocent, a spider without a thread. I thought her everything not of this world that was breathless and reckless, but inscrutable. Sometimes she was my own inhibition. Zipping through an open window. Spying on giants. On and on into the colder, darker water without looking back. Or maybe she was dumb as a baby, crawling toward the edge of a table? And who knows, maybe the world would be flat. A journey like that, beyond rescue. Did she think herself alone? Hoarding nothing, beyond return. One day home, the blistered blue room—disappears. What had been a point of light in the sky becomes a place.

## CROCODILES AT NEYYAR DAM

Every year a few villagers  
disappear from the shallows,

washing clothes. They say danger  
lives at the edges. But edges are

everywhere. Muscular trap,  
force field of death: my heart,

the tops of my feet  
scissor the cold below.

Saris on the bank, brilliant maps  
to nowhere, rinsed of dusty orbit—

When the shoreline disappears,  
there is only water.

Green, gold. Winking.  
Heroic self, what if

this plasmic mess has nothing  
to do with you—

a honey hive, an interstellar  
lung you floated into.

## AGAINST MONSOON

Another sticky morning in the hotel.  
On the window ledge, pigeon chicks  
nested in grey-white feathers squint  
in the weak light. Bundles of muscle  
and vein, beneath hot-yellow fuzz.  
Quivering. Faint coos in and out.  
I tilt the window open, glass sooty,  
bottom edge plastered with bird shit  
and feathers. The gap too narrow  
even to fit my wrist through. City dust  
floats up over them, into the room.  
Throbbing twin hearts. Insides almost  
touching through the thinnest raw silk.  
They murmur against each other. I can't  
look away, can't take in sufficiently.  
The air they will grow into pulls at me,  
a concavity around their white, fluttering  
heat and sound.

## AGAINST MONSOON

In the market I pretend to be  
an ordinary person, browsing  
the fake-gold earrings.  
Accidentally purchase a pair  
of nose rings. Tearing pages  
from my notebook for toilet paper.  
It no longer matters, the record  
of this unending day.

## EXTRAS

We wait in a room with dusty computers, folding chairs, no windows. Dressed in ill-fitting prom clothes of a stiff carpet material. All of us young foreigners picked out by the same man from the streets of Mumbai, promised nine hundred rupees for the day. Plus free lunch.

The film: something about a nuclear holocaust and we are to be reporters. First we have tortured waiting. The heat. The clothes more and more smelling of mildew. We begin to wonder. Have we been forgotten.

Has the scene been cut. Outside, the city becoming urgent with night. Finally someone delivers a few plates of samosas. I am the only American, but the German boy knows about America. He lived in Virginia during high school, his most miserable year of life, by far. *How do you people survive such cruelty? And every day you go on accepting more, to become what kind of person?* I laugh, uneasy.

Isn't that the way of school everywhere?

Before we can finish eating the door opens, and we are called. A maze of dim rooms into a stone hall. Broad steps, red carpet. At the top a man is the President of India behind a podium.

We are each given a tiny notebook with a pencil stub. Too many of us, directed to rush out to question the real actors, the few of them scattered on the steps in heavy mascara. Suddenly frantic, all of us pushing not to be caught alone before the cameras.

Push. Ask questions. My actor nods gravely as I make it to the front. We will be voiced over:

Write. Push. Ask. It doesn't matter what.

## GLADIATOR FOR A COMING AGE

So long as I am allowed  
to seek death, I will not mind

a trivial cause: to fall through space  
before a million spectators.

Murder and ardor, the awe  
of the holiday crowd.

Then mile after mile of dreariness,  
the spread of small houses,

each a safety valve for the forces  
coursing through, anarchic.

Again the king and queen  
abandon the town, and I live

as I have always lived, waging  
play battles in the air.

Seen from above,  
it remains within human nature

to translate a dream—  
the division between

ideal and practice  
being love.

## VOYAGER

bathed in days and nights  
rounding the murky planets

I kept nothing  
the solar winds

filaments the moons

like clouded mirrors  
turned with me—

when the dream broke  
searing white

a bottomless cold

clearness that was  
not water took me

I floated outside  
there was an outside

and the fire I had

worshipped as my own  
slow burning heart

appeared a golden  
cell that grew smaller

## AFTER THE VANISHED

### *Remembrance of now*

The lucky ones  
who never missed  
the seed  
that never opened  
the day that never ended

### *Consolation*

Voices faded carrying  
the orchard turned  
inward after the rain  
taking for the foal  
the fallen apple trees  
stricken with new leaves

### *The empty throne*

The page refuses  
to answer I nudge  
with my toe  
then kicking spitting  
wanting you to say  
yes and hand me the beauty  
of my old age

### *Sculpting in smoke*

No one could touch  
a name without  
a face without  
and clear green light  
becoming winter  
invincible invincible

PRETTY HUMMINGBIRD, a bitter mask, your fasting  
on sugar, your shimmering away from this town.  
From the dead you have learned how to live  
without a body for a home. Do you see how  
the war was water to the river? River, soul to  
the factories. Factories gear to our garden.

## AGAINST MONSOON

Paperbacks and bottles. Coins  
and rumpled sheets. I wait to board  
the train, find another woman  
in my seat. I show my ticket. Hers  
stamped with the same number.  
Back at the hotel in another room  
there are no windows. Air conditioner  
buzzing everything numb. I switch it  
off, lie on the bed in pure darkness.  
Almost pure. Tiny silver needles holes  
pinging from my eyes. A Bollywood film  
plays behind the wall. Someone calling  
someone. Voices muffled by plaster.

## RITUAL

1. When navel oranges are not available, Valencia will do. Picture an apartment the color of vanilla ice cream, the man all ready for work, a silver tie cinched at his throat. He may already have eaten breakfast. We don't know. A few dirty glasses and a pan in the sink. A tea bag on a saucer by the stove. We find him on a stool at the kitchen isle, stripping the peel from an orange. He gets it off all in one piece and sets it on the tile. Next he separates the wedges. His pale hands move deftly and the tight knit of his face is somehow lightened and teased apart by concentration. He pulls the membrane from each segment of the fruit and makes a pile of the white threads. Then, after all the meticulous work, he flings the pith out the window, for the pigeons wobbling after crumbs six stories below.

There is an energy to the movement incompatible with the action, as if the insubstantial jettison has relieved a great weight. A gladness comes over him. Had we arrived an hour earlier and found him in his bathrobe, delivering two pinches of bottled algae flakes to the Betta in the fish tank, we might have glimpsed the tiredness of duty, the dead sea between ritual and routine.

The pigeons might not even be there. Perhaps the first morning he'd thrown the pith on a whim: the window was open, the sock sweat of the city poured in, and, in a fine mood, he wanted to give something back. Thirty minutes later, on his way to work, he noticed an oily pigeon outside the building with a shred of something translucent in its beak. The white threads of the orange were all fiber—it must have been the aroma.

He bites into the first slice with his eyes closed. The orange fragrance mists into his nostrils and he can't separate the juice breaking in his mouth from the inhalation that seems the very spirit of the fruit. Each wedge has a distinct flavor (this he considers evidence of their individual distinctness, but we attribute the fact to a change in his own chemistry, his capacity for taste, his digestive and salivary secretions. He would be startled by the hypothesis).

2. All through dinner, a mother hears ice cubes clink in the glasses and thinks of the bathroom lock, the hook dropping into the eye-hole and the silence that fills the room, like the atmosphere of another planet. She needs the lock, even if no one comes. That catch of metal gives the walls substance after a day worn thin, sharing her sandwich, buttoning shoes, with her own hair, coat, thoughts, dishes undone. And if someone does knock, the mother says, "No." There is only one

toilet in the little house; this is the lone moment of sacrifice for everyone else. She runs the water loud. The washcloth softens her face and she dips her fingertips—the first two—into a jar of chamomile eye cream. Herself again in the steamy mirror, she breathes the delicate honey-earth blossom, patting it into her skin. Soon she will be in the dark bedroom, kissing someone goodnight, giving and tasting a gold sweetness again.

3. Sharpening pencils, pulling back drapes, filling the gas tank in amazement.
4. Clarissa at fifteen, sucking on gummy bears from the tip pocket of her apron. The first few are bittered by copper, but after that they taste pure. They are special, because they're forbidden. She takes them from the ice cream fountain, her thick arm hair gunked in shades of pistachio and strawberry from scooping sundaes for the kids from school, who wear flip flops into the restaurant, their hair wet from swimming. If she smiles very sweetly and asks about the pool, or compliments a new haircut, or... (she uses the word *stunning* a lot) their parents sometimes leave her a tip just for swirling soft serve into a cone. The dollars rolled in her pocket are flimsy and stale as the cones, but the gummy bears juice up her mouth. She has learned to recite the specials, take an order, and report to the manager (who looks like a gummy bear) with a handful of candies gelled behind her teeth.

One day, the older drop-out kids from under the bridge file into her section. She smiles nervously and they don't smile back: faces punctuated with metal. They've come for all-you-can-drink coffee. She knows better than to be nice, but can't be anything else. They leave her a pile of cigarette butts and pennies for a tip. She throws the filters in the trash but keeps the pennies. Later, wiping down the fountain, she drops a gummy bear into her mouth and it tastes of ash.

5. Splashing into the lake feet-first, or inch-by-inch shivering in.
6. Before supper a lit candle, the bite of sulphur, and a single kiss like hot wax.
7. Friday afternoon washing the chalkboard. Miss Bliss takes a peppermint candy from the drawer of her desk and fills a bucket from the supplies closet with water. The dust hasn't settled on the week. Mattie has two checkmarks beside his name, but she let him go to recess with the others, though she ought not to have. The day's lessons linger in the ghosts of her scrawl, the chalk dust like ground bones. She dips her hand in the water, tart with chlorine. Peppermint chills in her

throat. She starts on the right upper corner and sponges down and back, down and back, until the foggy green hide is fresh and revived.

Until that morning, her real name had been Janet. Then Priya, with a shiny brown bob and a face like a panda, had told her a secret. Miss Bliss knelt on the tile and Priya giggled and cupped her ear. Tiny fingers of hot breath in the wisps of her hair.

She whispered, something, something, something, "...Miss Bliss."

8. Composing one of these rituals. For you, whom I may never see.

## ON A COLORLESS MORNING

Already I could feel the tremble of history  
assert itself, wanting to be fed.  
Rapidly the lights of the station  
adjusted to my eyes, as the unified mist  
over buildings and shrubbery dissolved into  
the tired face of the city. I sensed the coming  
expectation of faces, my own summoned as an absence  
reformed. At home I knew curiosity  
would be satisfied. And though I had stopped  
believing buttons and cloth to be more or less  
implicit than skin, I longed to leave my luggage  
in the hands of strangers, now boarding the train.  
And then the journey was obsolete. The treasure  
solid and glinting in my suitcase. Now  
divided, a burden not because it was heavy but  
because it was mine.

## GETTING CLOSER

Whatever had happened in the meantime  
acquired a shape in that sequence of rooms,  
where I identified not with but against.  
Their beloved faces no longer obtuse.  
In my absence they had haunted  
the old clearings, climbed miles  
up and down the stairs. Knowing each  
could summon only what each knew,  
I recognized the path of past longings  
and vows since marked obsolete. And felt  
the presence of days that would distort  
a new reflection. Was the child sleeping  
in the mirror stronger than the body I lived?  
My name again, inflected true. And the food  
smelled deceptively good, as if I'd journeyed  
all that way to come home for supper.

## PROXIMITY

Winter's redundant labors  
of shoveling. From inside, the world  
appears a fragmented whole, complacent to  
whose dotted lines of order.  
Only language hears itself think.

As a stadium of remembrance  
I am emptied of myself.  
A woman holds a key to her mouth,  
draws on it. *Bunk cigarette.*  
Somewhere a car remains unignitable.

But I have invented this distance.  
At the concert, shivering and garbage-bagged  
against the rain we weathered  
the music. Its irretrievable storm.

Graffiti of mere shape,  
snow sizzles into the hot spring  
like an image disappearing  
into the mind. Dissolute  
newsprint. The shells of hermit crabs,  
I learn, are too small to contain  
their inhabitants. For reification  
we blow shells of glass.

## WHO COULD HAVE IMAGINED A HEART TO BE

so full of blood. And a face just the lit  
surface of a planet. The first reflection  
in the lake was respiring, penetrable.  
Hovered in the shallows, tadpoles, translucent,  
the seed of their legs. And then the slow,  
cold clouding over. Eyes that fail to see  
becoming strange, weary wish-gods—  
who better knows the tortured affair  
between matter and air? Tina no longer the favorite  
after she was dropped. *Forgive me.* Fractures  
sung through blue glass eyes. Blinking into the grip  
of a house. Heavy breath of dog, wincing on its tumor.  
In the heat of the thunderstorm it was not just the settee—  
But the odor of death. Wedged between inner and outer.  
Mosquitoes poured through the open door.

## ELSEWHERE

### Upstage

Hero stands before glass doors in the glaring sun.  
Words won't come.

Closing my eyes against the faces  
I cannot see in the dark

panorama of seats  
weighted with another company:

the clasp of women and men  
breathing my breath,

the light of something—is it fire?

### Offstage

I have something left to ask—

As always it is almost too late  
in the forging of our lives.

Someone has thrown a star—  
we all rush to catch it.

It blazes from the balcony,  
and we stand below, cowered,

arms red and gold, glinting,  
crossed over our heads.

### The Archives

Perspective as prison or levitation—

Men abandoned the factories  
after the war, the gears

becoming obsolete. They learn  
what it is to stare into space.

SLOW CLOUD, ENTRANCE: MONOLOGUE OF THE HAUNTED SELF

But you still feel ten years old. A paper bag  
filled with tarantulas. Outside, it rains: again and again  
the painting distorted, in shifting casts of mood. Whose image  
have you altered now, to put your name on? A drift in a town  
you nearly own, shrinking snowman of a self. As if a doctor's hand  
would forgive these years, without you your life spinning like  
a planet. *Hello again*. Dial tone. Empty harbor. Dark stare.  
In the mirror a dead girl has risen. What is it like, chasing  
the light down there? The other world looms like a spaceship,  
a small boy in the transom window. He says your shadow  
makes you look sad. His ship widening its circle, the sky  
drained of white. Only a minute ago you flew on legs  
mutely gleaming, made of animal and glass. Unspoken  
in the chaos between streetlights. Still waiting to be  
born—even now you are waiting to be born.

## DOWSED

The dream takes me by disguise,  
a flood of sheer, glowish  
un-intention—  
watercolor without the color,  
in un-mystical daylight.

Waking amidst a debris  
of craving and your image  
and my image afloat from  
the clear walls of our bodies,  
lurking beneath their clothes.

Reflection,  
be merely reflection,  
not a coming undone.

I have slipped into a tangible  
uniform of myself, but—  
what am I doing here,  
dressing for you? The dream  
plane dissolved in this dusty circle  
of rooms, eye-catching light  
flecks levitate in a mind  
where the cool texture of morning  
buckets from a dirty well  
Staggering my face, lurid but  
scintillated toward clarity:  
wrong and true.

DEAR SUFFERING EGO

What if I put I in a box

and tape it up to send to you. You have always adored  
tape and other adhesives.

ONE DESIRES to speak into evening's glare, to claim a thing.  
To claim a thing is to kill a thing. To kill a thing is day after  
day to occupy these walls. Outside, a house gone to pieces.  
Chicken wire. New color paint for the holes. A contract  
is a piece of paper. Inside a light goes on, where china  
is rinsed to translucence. A reward for losing the world:  
the contents of an envelope incinerated by a single glance.  
Body as wand. Body as portal. Body as sack of dirt.  
Cats screaming like babies in the ruined flower bed.  
On a rope from wall to wall we hang our clothes to divide  
the room into tiny rooms in which to be alone.

## HUNGRY GHOST

Shut up in this floating room  
of a body, I rush into  
the atmosphere  
of late spring, that dirty  
pollen-heavy field  
of desire, apple trees  
disintegrating blossoms  
and hidden in a foliage  
of shrill calls, the animals  
electric-wired together—  
frippery, shimmer, and fever,  
without hands or imagination.

Unwashed, unwanted, wild  
with fatigue, in the howl  
of the world with a needle's  
eye for a mouth.  
Nothing can be swallowed,  
the sack of appetite  
fires its predatory glare.  
In the end, fathoming home  
to stacks of repairs—  
cracked plates, babies, and  
dishwater. Dropping the litter  
of all expectation, the special gravity  
of four studded walls  
and a roof caving me in.

## LAST BIRTHDAY BEFORE THE END OF THE WORLD

Give me an instrument for making instruments,  
mine is almost spent.

Give me prophecies, rusty science, all mechanism  
enhanced by rarity. Living among the flocks and herds

I continually restored myself,  
the enemies of infancy

at last becoming friends. In those airy gardens  
I learned the problem of wanting

to linger. Give me  
forbidden metals, silk roads,

electric currents. My heart has been working  
day and night all these years.

Tell me the secret formula—  
a little packet of light,

I look older and younger than I should. Let me be  
like the horse-breaker or lion-tamer,

who, successful, are content. They say  
the animals become submissive

only after being worshiped.  
We believe dreams

with a little leaven of reason:  
nitrogen haunts the atmosphere.

As to the origin of using fire I know nothing.  
Nor the hardship of procuring flame.

I HAVE NEVER CAUSED ANYONE TO WEEP NEVER MADE ANYONE  
AFRAID NEVER BEEN DEAF TO WORDS OF JUSTICE AND TRUTH

Will I outgrow the childhood notion that evil exists  
as a left-hand path that could cross me  
anytime but rarely does? The blue veins of it  
snaking through, in response to being  
excluded from me, remain  
sticky, ancient, high-pitched.

In a suit a man with  
black hair and a forked beard  
steps out of the woods.  
He seems to have been waiting for me.  
Strangers should not smile to each other in this  
vesper light. And yet, the gravel path  
continues. By this I  
mean to say, if I am a passing  
thought, does it matter if I end in violence?

After dark should you  
look back, or is it less frightening to become  
the blossom's rigid stalk.  
Like chastity  
fear flourishes in cold temperatures.  
Guardian of my primeval self,  
when will you release  
the aqueous body?

At this hour the river a slurry of light: eager water  
and calm slabs of veneer  
floating the city. The yellow spirit  
of last year's oat grass carves  
its circuitous journey.  
Who threw the first wound?

## NOTES

“From Time to Time an Original Likeness Reveals Itself”: draws language from Sandra Lim’s “Cheval Sombre.”

“The Orchid Room”: after Donald Justice.

“Parables”: italicized quotations from Simone Weil’s *Gravity and Grace*.

“The Great Beast”: draws language from Simone Weil’s *Gravity and Grace*.

“I used to Admire Her, Voyager”: after Sandra Lim.

“Gladiator for a Coming Age”: draws language from Bertrand Russell’s *The Scientific Outlook*.

“Elsewheres”: after Donald Justice.

“Last Birthday Before the End of the World”: draws language from Bertrand Russell’s *The Scientific Outlook*.

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