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Heart of the insect| [Poems]

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Heart of the Insect

by
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degree of

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Heart of the Insect

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I

1

Prelude

You hang photographs of nudes
you know well and take up your tuba.
Still a boy, you grow faint thinking of
full-fleshed women somewhere in the middle
of the yellow town. You wait for the women
with time in your hands like the first clear note
of the tuba.

Think of what you could do without this town
sweeping into the sea by grains. Sixteen years
and you fear your mind will buckle to boredom:
so many days between today and the snow,
so many miles to the houses that resist
the music. You wish for anything
you don't have.

The rhythm is always the same, the yielding
of sea to the day like your body to the space
of your room. Inland the ocean's voice
falls away to your tuba at the western window.
Through all the suffering you forget
the naked women watching you, their eyes like stars
settling on that raw town.

Once White

Rain, and the earth bruises easily.

Home loses its whiteness and the family inside
confesses: I have used paint, coins,

and the language of Poland to describe him. Father,
you lost us in some dream you had of your life.

I bought a photograph of a dead actor

and haven't seen you in years. My younger sister
says to a man she loves, "I can picture soldiers
entering the small towns of Poland and firing

into screams." All she has seen is the streets
growing around the house, once white.

And my own work is wrong. In old movies

there is romance in the shelling and rain.

Grandfather

Your history doesn't belong on the railroad
but I take you back to the same station
where you first touched America. A man
lights his cigarette, watching the earth move
faster than smoke. You give me
the dictionary, black and thirty years old,
that taught you to say "moon" to the fullness
of light still following you.

Your heart broke, abandoning streetlights
in small towns. Compartments shuddered,
cheap whiskey and old friends at each state line.
You go to see one of the dead: the first woman
to dance with you in that Mexican village.

I kiss your hands, dark from years of carving
fish meat from its fence of bones. Once more
you board, visiting a life that has vanished.

Stealing My Sister's Birthmark

The ruby light of La Palma brings no miracles.

Along the sea's edge a crescent moon

curves to the hollow of sand where a man's arm

circled my sister. I know him.

Here are fuchsia, jasmine I crush into perfume,

the deep bones of ocean studded with pearls,

women swarming around windows to show

their curiosities, tattoos. At Enrico's

my sister dances on a mahogany table,

petals fall from her black hair. A sailor waits.

Air buzzes with morning. High heels.

My sister powders her birthmark, spine

trellised with bloodroot, a crimson tapestry

against the abalone of skin. My sister turns

in the heat of her siesta. Her back a landscape

of lives, stories: desert roses in ice,

the broken breath of a kiss, a field

honeycombed with dawn. My dreams

stain her sleep. Her eyes, like leaves, fall open.

I am the peasant girl whose large hands

bleed amaryllis, my porcelain neck just visible
above muslin. Upstairs at Enrico's
Juanita lies on a satin bed, the sparrows
tattooed on her breasts fill the man's room.
I try on my sister's embroidered shirt.
The scene is always the same,
my attempt to keep what was never given.

Fossils

The room to wake up in is the color of earth.
All night I dreamt of the human body,
even the hands had a past of their own.
I have heard you say that your fingers
replaced the darkness in the room
of a woman. I want her to tell me
how it feels: outside, in black hills
rocks press my flesh with their emptiness.
After light rises up
I trace the lines of a skeleton,
stones holding the curves of bones
like a first lover. When night fills
my house again, I want to awaken
to your fingertips leaving their prints on my body,
my stone.

Sleepless

I move sea shells
away from the influence of the moon.
Windows rattle
with a wind that pushes stars like marbles.
It is a game:
you can no longer sleep here,
where night settles
like black water outside the light of my room.
Gulls fly low
and you remember how young we once were.
Earth turns from the sun
changing the touch of your eyes on what surrounds you.
In the gardens
the flowers have lost their color.
I watch you leave,
your backbone tight and restless through morning clothes.
In moonlight,
you would have looked large and ready for anything.

For Your Wife

A sense of adventure left us stranded
like whales too large for the intended shore.
Divorce is war, your wife said boarding the train
to King's Point. She could go mad. She could plan
your death on old army maps that take up two seats.
I have learned to talk to myself: the lines
of your face say you are human, the gold
of your teeth will outlast us. You hold to
that body-light like a promised summer trip.
I think of the warm breath of the sea
sending us home to a sunlit room.
I wouldn't listen to your talk of children
and marriage. I visit the bed we died in
over and over. I dreamt your wife came to kiss me
in her restlessness before I slept.
Your profile is steady and handsome
as you distinguish woman from woman.

To My Husband

You move the beats of my heart
like small pebbles. Secretly, I have liked this life.
You watched the family grow: your face hard

for daughters and mirrors. I saw the children
go to you, moths to a faint light.
They would lean their heads on your chest,

listening. You did not answer. Your breath
lifted and fell with daybreak. It would betray
your ghostly heart to mention love. You

were afraid the women would collect like flies
around your body. The children tried words
to bring you back to our life. I gave you

memories that sank deep into your face.
Doubt no longer rose into open air. Now the moon
covers your heavy body and like a moth

I quietly love my life.

II

Black and White Photograph of Joanna

My baton draws your name in the air. Music swells.
The years collect gently as the last movement
of Chopin, finches perched in a concert hall.

Within a room where my wife listens to the radio
and my children choose their toys by color,
a photograph of you is hidden.

You are dressed in black and surrounded by oboes.
Your eyes say there is a choice and a glare of metal
complains: Be gentle. Your breath is like a bee's.

My window grows smaller and smaller,
a story my children forget.
Every evening I look for the ocean

of your blond hair amid the applause.
That staccato of waves, a sail ballooning slowly,
makes my wife smile at the radio. On the floor

the sound fills a dollhouse and disappears

like wind. You believe there is never enough praise.

The grey dots composing your tiny face

cause my heart to rise like an aria of insects.

The yellow wings of a bird, a kiss,

find comfort in the air meant for you.

Collections

Powder, anise, and crinoline.

You pick up my hand mirror as if you lifted my breasts,
turned them flat and silver. The portraits
around the mahogany table look past your long hair:

you wonder what it is like to be a woman. The dreams
return. Black lace sticks to your lips.

Snow collects, leaving only the shape
of a house. You kiss the snowflakes

from the eyelashes of your mother.

Arrested for forgery, she fingers
your ivory cane, her face white as the paintings,
red lipstick missing her mouth like an awkward rose.

You cool your coffee with snow,
touch pale letters from other women
like gossamer money. She smokes
a red-tipped cigarette and covers her cheeks
with rouge. My dreams are of porcelain dolls.

Fever

If you could feel the snow fall
across your window in your sleep,
you would. There are more important gestures:
the woman who comes to tell you of the world
you left. Don't forgive her the stories
of the birds, hungry and crazed,
knocking on the glass like ghosts. She doesn't
notice the flowers by the bed have withered,
leaving a smell that shakes your empty stomach.

When it breaks, the snow will be waiting.
Your skull burns like a bag full of spring seed
and you don't care. Your hands are dying sparrows,
cold and twisted, that watch for the night.
Imagine all the people who've done it before:
a woman has returned to speak of her illness.
If you could ask her for a name, thinking
of her dead sister, she would smile at you
and say: complaints.

Asylum

You suffer the touch of the night
like a swarm of insects. All the women in pink gowns
go north. While they are gone it is quiet.
You slip into a blue hum of the past:
the corner your mother never left, her blood
filled your cupped hands, too small to hold it all.
It was an accident. You think you aren't dead
and a woman pushes her arm through glass
to the darkness. Here they know
their lives and have given up the honeymoon,
the smell of green and leaves that fill up
the trees. Your footprints were red
for a year and no one noticed. It's a cold month,
yet you see the colorful wings outside the window.
Ignore the sounds of flapping in the white walls.

Accommodating the Silence

Mainland, and the ship is sinking too fast.
The tide leaves us fish-eyed, memory
dropping like a first anchor through the waves.
Nothing comes ashore: time drags its body
slowly. We know nothing when we see it.

We carry the hearts of widows, sad messages
in bottles set adrift. The waves have come this far
only to go back. I can hear how it will be,
the sea turning on the lost. And you will ask
as the broken boat arrives: Is this all I need to know?

Still Life

1.

Growing old I beg for roses.
All the dresses left in the carved wardrobe
are designed to accept flowers.
The slow curves of the necklines,
the softness, the colors,
are still like the centers
of various lush fruits. We compete,
even in our decay. I sip tea
stirred by wrinkled fingers
and press yellow poems to flat,
heaving breasts, waiting for roses.

2.

Let the water spread
until it is too late,
I will talk to myself
above my breath about this life:
the fruit, the flowers, the table,
all fail me like an unfinished memory.
But I must sleep somewhere.
Flowers open to the sun

with a softness my body has not freed.

My accusations sometimes forget

that the delicate lie here. This room

has grown its own features: light

startles the room and is gone.

A Photograph of Roses

You stand in front of the cottage with your cough,
surrounded by roses. The doctor comes
to sound the regalia of your chest,
his skilled hands fill the top of your pajamas.

Catherine, barefoot, holds you -
you are a bee resting
against a warm stone: her tears fall
from your shoulders onto the flowerbeds.

At night your green satin shirt presses
your chest, a landscape. The sun falls
on Catherine's arms and as she takes your picture,
she knows the doctor has given your body another memory.

Ramona Speaks to the Rain

In every accident there is the victim,
lingering like perfume after an encounter.
Ramona straightens her skirt, using the touch
she saves for roses. She no longer imagines

a waiter's hands or how he would bring her wine,
the faint smell of fruit trailing the glass.
It is just a restaurant the color of pale violets.
The castanets of her heart click to the footsteps

of the waiter and the memory of a poor town.
There she learned rain by the soil it displaced,
small graves dug to the sound of a fading heart,
her own. The sky was a mosaic of grey stones

when she heard her father's bullet
pass like a tiny bird through his chest bones.
Rain echoed around her forehead, the gun's
note distinct enough to break glass.

She watches her sherry, the vermilion of tired roses,
her lips murmuring to weather. She thinks

the mind is a victim no one can speak to.

After Carlos

(Mother to Child)

I wake, dreaming I bought you crayons, paper, a black dress.
At the window, iris and lupine are haloed with light
and your eyes, tiny rocks, stare at me.
The bullets touched only our Carlos,
leaving holes in my wardrobe clothes like black moths.
His breath no longer blossoms in air, calling your name.
You blame me.

His yellow photograph hangs in the kitchen.
You see your name in his eyes, waiting for words.
You remember him staring at bird bones in a glass.

Your father is gone and your lean voice asks me
to suffer like a stone dropped in water. I cannot.
I can tell you of the change between night and day,
when stars are the silver bellies of fish.
The moon is riddled with dark bites.

Sleep waits for you. You watch what dreams
do to my face, hoping someone you know
will wake you in the morning.

Keeping the Myths

I The Mystic

A man waits in a park.
The journey he did not take
grows in his mind: the broken
engine of his absence. The fish
of this pond move water
into patterns that his thoughts
translate. Unfamiliar fingers
try to touch the floating bodies.
There are no signs,
only the knowledge that
one place is as good as another.

II Noah

You have stopped talking about it,
the flood taking the animals
from the last fields. Beasts are leaving
people in water too high to cross anymore.
Fear turns their human faces up. The pairs
have gathered together without love.

They await a signal as if they had heard
the words before. A wife sits in an empty house
full of predictions.

Begin with the darkness of rain.
Like a widow my body is held
between the moon and the earth. I wonder
at the choices: only the birds
keep us informed. Now even
the mountains have disappeared.

III The Siren

She uses birds to her advantage,
arranging the heaps
of string and dead insects.
She asks for changes, her life
has been a misunderstanding.
She holds a man to her body,
whispering of the smallest details.

IV Mermaid

The captain, far from any sea,

drowned. The newspapers
could not explain the blueness
of the basin water that cradled
his face. No cries,
only the quiver of her skin
under wetness. There were no
words to give each other.
He had tried to tell her
of the end of surfaces:
the shifting of images on the earth.
But she had broken through
the flesh, rounding the light
in half-human silence.
Some said his body unwound,
growing wings she would not understand.

The History of Objects

It's the eyes of the sepia photographs
that make him turn from twilight.
The woman calls agate elephants, onyx fawns
delightful. Her hair

is a cat in the night. Her eyes ask why
the perfumed fingers of a geisha carved
a stone bird. Arranged for his future,
jade monkeys climb shelves tenuously.

He doesn't sleep, talking to dark features,
hearing miniature footsteps like mosquitoes
against his window. She draws

a line around herself, fingerprints in dust,
realizing the glass, the ivory animals
are his life. She looks toward the light.
In her eyes he sees himself as a child,
forging a path like water over cold rocks.

III

The Ascent

Soldiers could kill an angel here
and the snow wouldn't change its shape.
The Russian moon watches men carrying death
in the woods. Farther back, the bark of dogs
as wives grind their teeth in fear. I remember

my wife: the red and black scarf to hide
her hair, eyes and arms limp. With every noise
her fingers jumped, numb and white. I know
the sudden sound of dead men.

I speak only to friends now. Soldiers fear
falling and never getting up again.
We dream of food, drink, and women with bare heads.

In the ring of bullets I think of my wife:
how she could hear the last requests of soldiers
in every word they said.

To Rokossovski In Case of War

I lock the door and imagine
my husband's neck breaking. Cicadas
scratch their legs while cannonballs,

larger than shaddock, graze their wings.
Men's bones fall from trees,
acorns among the leaves. Full clusters

of fruit ripen in orchards at night
as I listen to my son weeping. His cries
are like pigeons, warming their eggs

with horse hair. Trains pass, foxes,
taking the smell of plums, a soldier
with a raw potato against his lips,

the moon. I open my blue shirt to my son.
There is no way to leave.

Parachutist, 1944

Wind falls on the marsh carrying aviators
like a slow murmur. A man's arms
spread among the cattails as though the earth

moved to meet him. In the distance,
a woman in a red gown waltzes with a colonel.
The languor of her gaze says she will never be lonely.

I fall through a ladder of air onto pawprints.
Dead soldiers curl in the water. A breeze
lifts their parachutes, floating white scarves.

Blood collects on my chest like rain. German music
across the water, and a song drifts through the mud
saying soldiers are always alone.

When He Returns From War

The daughter he doesn't know tries to catch
white-tailed hawks. She sees the first light
shining from a room with a mirror,
past the fluttering wings of a bird.

A last chime stills the air and the soldier's wife
feels his mustache against her cheek.

In a square of light he reconstructs his knee.

Their silhouettes, poor semblances

of the people they wanted to be. Perhaps
no one is left in nearby houses where dogs wait
like portraits of saints among balls of insects.
The wounded notice a plump moon leave
the same twilight as the little girl's.

Alexis Karepov's "Portrait of a Spy"

1. Sonja, His First Wife

Clouds gather like a fat woman's breasts
pressed against white silk. All winter
in Moscow I dreamt columns of men shot,
without weapons. My train passes through snow,
gone at the thin spine of a river. I open

a book to leave on the table where dresses
are scattered like clues. Two years ago,
my first execution: the man's wooden teeth
fell before he did. Today I hear guns
in the click of the engine, and have sewn

a pine molar in the hem of a velvet skirt.
Snow is the blank spaces in the photograph
of my new husband. Brown hair looks frozen
on his forehead. His muscles were weak,
dry beneath his uniform. I write

in short notes. A spider hurries off cold glass,
its body a dark spot between the fingers

of my tan gloves. New ancestors
could be constructed from snow.
My rhinestones look at me from the window:

I am incomplete. Illya, my last husband, said
there is only one future. Wounded men reach for me
in dreams, their arms like iron candelabras.
Mata Hari, crossing into Poland,
believed snow the wedding rice of the unloved.

The moon, a rhinestone, is almost the color
of ice. Glass frosts, unevenly imitating
the cool breath of insects. In youth
I imagined human histories and collected secrets,
the beads of a rosary.

In school they taught parabolas, the composition
of roses, possibilities. From an aunt
I first learned espionage: I handed a map of Italy
to a stranger leaving our train for St. Petersburg,
my heartbeats held in a pattern of pearls.

2. Petrouchka, His Second Wife

All night I defended my husband against nothing.
Daylight, and I am the wife in the picture
touching Nikolais' breast, a tattoo
still distinct on an aging shoulder.
Alibis grow constantly instead of children.

His former wife a suicide
whose touch stayed bitter on my clothes.
Towards the end and nearly naked,
she threw rubies at the portico.
One is my wedding ring,

others are embroidered in spider webs
on my cream colored dress. For years
I have carried the feeling of war
like a piano player who shuts her eyes
knowing the sound of the keys.

Nikolais confirms my worst fears:
war, a lizard on a parapet waiting
for the finality of soldiers like morning
light. Our marriage in Petrograd

was full of strangers. Do you remember

the woman with her black hair pushed up
on her head by a net of wrinkles?

She was like my mother, her handwriting
a language of stars I couldn't read.

Sometimes a day is not only strategies,

not only being someone else.

His medal tarnished with blood

is next to my auburn braid in the jewelry box.

Our bodies heal slowly, two traitors,

hearts pierced by a single bullet.

3. From Death: An Address to the Artist

Your portrait of my body
depicts the gathering of blue swallows
like loss above the earth. I dream
my bruises turn to snow, shadowy limbs
like evergreen and fir encased in ice.

My hands are an afterthought,
a flash of birds, the way my face
fills the mirror each morning and is gone.
Painters never understand time. But Alexis, you knew
sudden curves of a mouth, a sparrow darting for flies.

The canvas whitens at my spine.
I dream the train rushes by like a child's breath,
a narrow light leading me to the person
I would have been without politics.
Even you believed our arrival brutal.

Giving Up the Piano

Father, you carved the pine legs
from carousel horses and like a silver ribcage
set the wires singing. The wooden pedal
is a tree that didn't bloom, the keys
handsome as the smile of an astronomer.

Moonlight moves slowly across the keys,
drops to the floor, a musician's blind eye
dreaming of a lady in white gloves.
Air fills with the hum of mosquitoes.

My fingernails, so pale I colored them
scarlet. The moon, a magician's daughter,
disappears when I flatten black keys
with my concerto. Even you have come to love
silence. Lead me to a row of maples, broken
not by starlight but by the darkness I've called absence,
music.