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Sky burial | [Poems]

Octavia Maie Campbell-Orde

The University of Montana

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Sky Burial

by

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Date
SKY BURIAL
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Sky

But the birds sing in silence
    as they build their nests of light.
The house across the street
    looks amputated from the sky.
Inside, a family moves like clouds
    across the floor.
They’re putting away leftovers:
    wings worn grey from flight,
rain the shape of open mouths.
    Then—a length of string—the sun’s
hard light. They wonder
    who has made them.
Translation

There is something in the mind:
a person, a splinter, a ghost.
Something that needs to be pulled.
Something, which if left inward, grows
big. Inside and outside
have left their borders behind;
numbers can’t contain this.
Every morning you wake up to wounds
haunting the mind of this city.
Out of the Earth

I went into the street
saw the animals
get off the pavement and walk away

I went to the river
and saw it give its light
back to the sun

I followed the rocks
out of the earth
the grass was falling back

into the ground
I was a shadow
that grew there
The blood-red moon is kept
in a pocket of clouds. I want to enter it
like a sigh entering the body. The wind
barely moves beyond the valley.
But there is someone here collecting leaves
from the mountains. With each leaf
the mountain opens its brown door.
We followed each other through our childhood.
But when she left, a mask of fireflies covered
the moon and the evening closed its heavy lid of
clouds over the stars.

Sometimes, in my dreams,
she arrives like a letter—written in a language
I can’t understand. Maybe she is a cloud
passing through a star. Maybe she is made

from the memory of stars. Each night, her voice
is pulled from the throats of birds. And in a sky
that continually buries itself her voice
sings underneath.
The Body of the Heart

The cows hearts being sold
on the streets of Calcutta
are waiting for their bodies
to return to them.
The flies (who are merchants)—
their feet red with distance—
know the hearts inside and out.
They imagine selling the bodies
back to the hearts:
following the lines of blood
out of the heart and back to the body.
Now the flies as if all in one voice
are speaking—their eyes
are maps of what they have seen.
I.

Inside each eye is a meadow in which your sight keeps me.
The trunks of trees are as dark as the pony
that grazes by the fence among the carved gold of autumn.
He is reaching for clover, but his muzzle softly
cannot fit through the small squares of rusted wire.
If I feed the clover to him, palm to mouth,
will it feel as delicate as your breath
that stirs me each night? Or will it feel like you
turning in darkness reaching for my waist—
trapped like a vision that won’t leave?
The pony’s tail lengthens into shadow
like sight falling out of your eyes.

II.

I wonder how you can see through so much darkness.
The trees in this forest sometimes emit black leaves
and moths follow you they way they follow the path of moonlight
held in the dark. When you wake you will rub the dust from your eyelids.
This is how, each time you open your eyes, you teach darkness
to sing. This is how the wounds we made on autumn’s leaves
fall apart in our hands.
Anna's Grave

The wings of moths knock
against my window
as Anna watches the night climb
out of the ground to greet me.
She explains the way
roots spread like shadows
under the earth
and how the ground
looks like a cloud
when it's torn open.
This year the flowers
lost their petals on purpose
and I watched
as the wind buried their shadows
in unmarked graves.
The moon looked through
an insect's wings—
I chased it until it landed on the sleeping grass.
Who made that insect I
wanted to trap in the pasture of my hand?
My grandmother is buried inside me with two Russian Princes. 
Born into painting, they start to sketch.
Sometimes, I am a woman lost in her own backyard.
Sometimes, I'm a young boy 
who falls into a pond and is barely saved.
Their wrists never seem to tire—day and night,
time is drawn across my bones. They do not miss
the broken clocks of their bodies (now buried inside walls).
They do not miss the half-life of love, now that they are so close.
They will never put their brushes down.
The body blurring all color.
In the envelope of my life
I slowly write my way out. Each letter
a tunnel burrowed into paper. The meaning
of each word escapes—before it is returned to the page.
Who returns it and why?
Breakfast

Across the table I watch
you eat the trout.
You take it apart:
you eat its eyes, the color
of swallows.
You open its skin
remove tiny pearls
suspended in its cheeks.
Its face now resembles a vase
a child knocked over.
But you don’t seem to notice
the way its body, now an empty sack,
floats on the white of the plate.
Your hands stop moving.
You sit gutted with light.
Your gaze like seaweed
held in water.
For Hilary:
To whom a boy once said,
"You should wear your smile more often."

Each night before she goes to sleep
the woman takes off her smile.
She puts it in the nightstand next to the bed
until morning. She wonders
what the smile does while she's sleeping.
Sometimes it wears
the faces of other people, it kisses
the lips of lovers who aren't hers, it shows
the feeling that leaves her each night.
Does it grin because it doesn't need her?
As if one day she will wake up—
her entire face missing—
The mother's in the kitchen, her brain's waterlogged.
She's looking with her hands for the drain
as steam gathers on the windowpane.
Something has taken the children away—
the water resembles the color of their hair.
She lifts her hands—fingers overfed—
skin turning old with the day.
She is putting dishes in the cupboard,
She is counting the days silently in her head,
putting aside broken dishes that should not be saved.
The children in the yard dance with the dog.
They like to flail and dance about as the dog searches
for a way out. Slowly, their laughter grows like fog.
It's as if each day he makes a bracelet of his hands. First, he drills a hole into his finger—tiny rubies roll across the desk. He solders his wrists together—a golden clasp—arms hammered into the shape of bent movement. This is why things always fall: the sapphire crowded with blue, the smile that fell from his face a year ago. Both are lost in the carpet, he knows because everyday he looks for them with missing hands. With hands that don't want to put anything down.
A Study

For Taylor

Everyone gathers around:
the whites of your eyes
like two rabbits sleeping, each circle
filled with trees.
But you are thinking of pinning butterflies to trees.
you want to examine
the monarch: they way its back rivers
navigate the yellow of its wings.
Here, the butterfly is held inside you
stunned, like something that can’t look away.
The stars hold up the immense black box
of the sky, the wind
as it counts each blade of grass.
Her voice unlocks
leaves from trees,
Her touch turns the moon inside out.
An old oak tree hovers above her
she braids its roots into darkness.
Her fingers are tired.
They, too, have become twisted
In a ground she rarely leaves.
Light Collecting

From every rock insects
scatter like stars and the birds
that once collected twigs of light
have flown away for the winter.
As you left, the moon
began to slowly erase itself
and the light collecting
under your skin made the clouds
look like mistakes. As if
what once was alive went underground
and was left with little—no, nothing—but space.
She remembered picking up the bird removing its wings and watching its body fall like a shadow away from light.

"Death must be dismantled properly" she heard, lifting the wings of the bird already too big for flight.
Two children lie in the grass
pretending to be feet. The parents stand over them—
each a gigantic leg—the legs move away
leaving dozens of smaller feet behind them....
Satyerkon

A woman grips a piece of thin, smooth, wood between her teeth. An egg on one side, her eye on the other—a counterbalance of sight. The outside of the egg like an eyelid suspended in blink. The eye sees through the skin like light held up to a hand.
Sometimes my poetry resembles the peacock
buried upside down by the dogs—a few tail-feathers
sticking out of dirt—

Sometimes my poems begin without a sound.
Once, a wren left its feather in the kitchen and came back
just to watch them dance across the floor.

And the hand that flew through the window
in a fit of rage (my sister's), removed itself calmly
from its enjambment once it realized its mistake.

Sometimes a word moves across the page
with the sadness of an animal.

This isn’t a poem that looks for meaning
in the signature of movement animals leave
across a pasture, or in the grin of an argument,
or in the body of what once was loved.
A girl sits by herself washing—
she has been halved by love. She is like a touch
no one felt, like breath the lungs always let go.
Maybe she is the flower outside her window
that grows toward the moon. Maybe she is
written into the earth like sentences of grass.
Against the window her hands bloom across the glass.
Her flushed cheeks rare as a red moon.
The Moon’s Balcony

The statue I made for him
sits on a shelf in my mind.
Everyday, it seems to wake like the dead:

across bridges my footsteps follow me,
In the cafes, walls breathe my breath.

But it is here that the evening
bows into darkness, here that the stars
wake inside my thoughts.
Poem Without Stars

Outside my window night drops
its heavy curtain. It pulls down
the stars, the moon, the planets.
They lie in a pile outside my window.
What will I do with all this light?
Poem With Leaves

In the forest I can't find him.
This is a green so deep you can only
sometimes see a deer. A dog
barks along the water. The leaves
thicken with rain.
Tree
guardian of snow
your thick limbs I want
to climb through
shake snow
from your branches: it falls
like hands spreading apart I
wait inside you like
a child buried
in its own body
The bed is an old woman who lies grey in the evening. She is bent at the spine—her life has been spent holding others. It is as if she’d never passed under a star. As if what woke up each night had finally left her. Voices no longer talked in their sleep. Now she thinks of the darkness growing around her, lovers sewing their voices into the walls. Doors open and close in her sleep. Each night is like the last—the moonlight lies across her like a scar. She doesn’t hear the wind singing quietly in the curtains, and the light is like a hand touching through something it cannot feel.
When he leans forward for me to wash him
in the bath, his back resembles a rare
turtle shell—the kind I found by the creek. Its color
stripped off into white. He likes it when I accept his body.
He is like light touching water, a stone skipped—
missing a step across the surface. And sometimes
when we are close, this close, it's as if our bones
fall into each other and our bodies are missing.
The sky is made out of stone
from the cemetery across the street.
In the mouth of the cemetery
there is a woman.
She remembers chasing her voice
into the field—
the way it hid under the winters white hair,
sat on the shoulders of trees,
and slept in the bodies of birds
emptied by winter.
The woman feels the wind shake
the snow from the trees and watches
it cover the grey teeth of graves.
In the distance, the sky slips
its sleeves of snow over the fields delicate wrists.
The woman shovels her voice
out of her throat—
her mouth an open grave.
The year is almost over so I sit down
to watch the leaves fall.
I am not even like the dead grass
the wind, for a second, picks up and holds.
The chicken whose head was bitten off by our dog did not survive. Its head fell through the fence while its body, still inside, ran in circles out of fright. All it could do was look without seeing—each eye brown as the dirt it lay on. And my sister, only able to move her voice, ran around inside herself until she no longer could. We buried the chicken soon after, its head and body sewn back into the earth—back into a ground that brings us together with the quietest voice.
The bird that flew into the windshield of our car
when I was a child could not be stopped. In its last moments—
before it realized glass wasn’t air—it must have seen
each eye turning inward on itself. And my mother
frightened at the wheel did nothing because
there was nothing to do—the bird half staying, half going.
As children, we must have been frozen
as we watched the darkness gather the last ribs
of light from the evening. But my mother kept driving
even though nothing could have been worse to her,
even though the lights from passing cars were tangled in her hair.
I see myself, but cannot see past
my childhood.
The ocean I played in, its rocks were as hard
as clenched fists. I never fell in
once. The moon caught my mother’s hair
each night. Her thoughts like tangled stars.
How can I move beyond this pacing
of water back and forth?
My mother sits by herself waiting for her childhood to begin. She is patient although she is barely inside herself. Her eyes like two empty teacups. Her body has been worn for years: mornings spent breaking ice from the trough, lifting bails of hay... but she is not bitter. The wren that flies in and out of the kitchen each morning sings the song she feels inside herself. That coming and going of love, that opening of what is hard to break. The lifting of stars...
It was as if he could calibrate the clouds,  
as if he ordered the sand,  
as if the evenings fabric began  
in the darkness of his skin.

But the camels with their dried-up bodies of water  
stood still. He wondered if  
with knife, he opened them like clouds  
if the wind would pick up the sand

and go, if the night's darkened wing  
would ever lift. He was a desert  
in himself. The clouds were sharpened  
silver with moonlight

the moonlight lay in pieces.  
He saw himself drinking rain from empty hooves,  
he saw the morning stand up without any legs  
its body the color of birth.
If You Were to Wander

For Richard

If you were to wander among these trees you would become one of them. Here the light of the moon collects

inside insects' wings and stars become the sentences of our thoughts.

But the leaves scatter like old wounds and the light that surrounds each piece of gravel

is turning into shadows. On the trees you can see your heart hanging on every branch

and the light that lands there has finally found a place to bury its wings.
Sky Burial

It's the way the vulture's beak
glides across the flesh before he takes it in,
the way he seems to count each hair,
the way he stares into the landscape
of the eyes. Is it then he knows
vision has broken out of the body?
That the skeleton he left is the same
skeleton of stars found inside each night.
In this way, he tucks the light
under his wings, and with everything living
inside him he wakes in astonishment.