1998

Lightbox| [Poems]

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The University of Montana

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Lightbox

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for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts
The University of Montana
1998

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Lightbox

poems by Joni Wallace
For my family and for Nasser
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Saeta (Ave Maria Stella)

Acknowledgments
I.
Aurora

The morning sky flashes
green, then amber, marbling
the bark of aspens. Bullheads circle
and pool at the edges of the stream,
cold and prescient in the half-dark.

We are searching for kindling
between strings of light
and fireweed while the leaves harden
and turn over. Moon
and no moon. Wet grass. The glint
of eyes. Three deer run through a cloud
and call out, alarmed, as the sky fades
and turns brackish. Everything bare,
brightly trembling.
We are prey to the small animals --
those that catch fire.
The Weather on Saturn

A boy in a fringe jacket walks
in the sage and ragweed with a brown dog.
He reaches toward a fence. Inside the wire
peacocks scratch the dirt and mewl.

This is Saturn. The stars above
shine like blue or purple roses,
studding the dark red air. Sometimes
the boy can see them, looking through
the clouds. The light radiating through the clouds
falls on the boy and the dog. Falls
in angles on the branches and fenceposts,
scattering on the ground under tangles of straw.

In the thick atmosphere a bicycle
leans, covered with red clay.
Do you see the barn, the color
of tobacco, smoldering against
the hillside? The boy raises his arms
toward the birds and moves toward them,
the fringe of his jacket rustling.
He must wash up, sing, and eat his dinner.

This is the weather on Saturn.
Ice falls from the clouds in slivers
of blue and silver, blankets the straw
and the birds with veils and cold hands.
Ode to a Winter Flock of Geese

One stands and waits in pencils of light, cloaked in white feathers. A rousting falls among the nests of weeds -- a rustling. A thousand wings under thin snow and the sparkle of flint, eyes black as pottery, blazing. Leaves shake with the bleating, the pounding of tiny hearts winged and unfurled at once in a band of new emigrants.

Above the cities and mines the dark arrows fall over the checker board: potato and wheat fields, termite mounds, blackberry bush and bright lakes. Bones, light as air, waxed, beat the sky tonight. I wash dirt from the clay statues littered on the lawn. The bird-shadows rush overhead. This is our bare communion. I wear the blanched robes, bathed in pale light.
Sister Poem

She walks inside a film white veiled
with rosebay her throat fills an opal light the coming train
hissing the rails glistening do you see
the pigs burned piled in wheelbarrows
by the fence

This is my sister she is tan she lives here
this house of mud this red canyon she waltzes she twirls
her blue skirt she carries me her sister the wooden doors
opened wide

Outside two magpies dive from branches
gleaning a black dog howls where are his legs
his teeth he shakes his thick coat
toward us
Girlfriend Poem

She watches the fireflies
light space between branches.
    Her dress translucent -- as if hung
between the shoulders of birds.
    Bats swarm in and out
of the palms like small kamikazes. She drops
to the ground,
throws a hair net filled with pebbles up
to catch the dark marauders in the webs.
    She likes to catch the warm bodies falling.
    She tells them to breathe.

The nights jolt her, oddly imitating
the sounds of animals.
    She has chased the landlord
with a mirror and a knife.
    Says "he is full of sores
on the inside and out. Can you see the line
around his iris?"
    He pants in the hall closet. Light spills
from under the door.

Her mother's voice awakens her
in a flood of wool and green wheat.
    She calls from the plains over
a red plastic phone: all of the new calves
    have the number "3" on their foreheads --
at the least the brindled ones. They cry out
unfettered, from the barns.

Celeste: at a bare minimum your children
still sleep in the changing light.
    Nail up the windows.
    Come to your knees.
Bajia Kino

I wake from a dream: sea washing up
to my knees -- so warm
so early. Crystals of salt on my calves
and the shrimpers still out.
A stream of nets cast under the horizon

and my mother wishing.
To go the races. To breathe
the salt-air. Sand and sand. The Mexican
boys selling shrimp and silver tequila
in waxpaper cups. Doghair and salt-smell.

I wake from a dream, faithless,
my dress tied to my thighs. I am
walking the half-mile
to the pier. Dogs, faceless,
full of milk, trail
my feet. I throw cups of shrimp toward a siege
of pelicans and gulls. They wheel
and squall, circling.

I wake from a dream. Sea kelp
tangled at my feet. High overhead
two bombers crease the open sky --

    indigo / gray

and gray tracks of vapor. Their shadows
catch and dive in the waves.

I wake from a dream: children running,
spilling from the school yard.
A bay horse tied to a flagpole. Bells ring out
from the cathedral and the town walls.
The sea will no lose her harvest.
Empty nets. Spiders drop
from the tower -- their webs all spun.
Fugue

A man watches me bathe
through a hole in the wall.
His wife laughs loudly
and washes her hands. I will
not be touched. Remember?

A small boy, pacing. Along
the acequia with a bowl of painted birds.
The woman, her arms cradling
a doll of rags and glass. Her
marble teeth. Him singing
"to put my foot in"
and "o corpse to be."

I am leaning from the bridge above
them. The olive fields
silver, open to water.
ripening. You are gone for good.
Only this echo we make and unmake.
Early Snow

Tonight the sky opens, obsidian
against earth. Lucent
above the snow, it spreads
at our feet in a pond.
In nets filled
with the purple of iris.

The moon, full, crowns the junipers.

We cross the field,
gaunt shadows
on the fence.
Listen --
the water unravels from its
berms of earth,
rattles through the ditch.

You are like that. Stone.

A boy in holy procession, hooded,
the miles clocked. Your feet
callused.

If I lay my hands
over the tracks of deer, the round hollows
pressed through to grass, if I
find the doe, blinded by the flash of headlights,
her quick breaths rising by the mud-wall --
will you turn to see the darkness,
our steps silvering the snow?
I stand too close in a coat
   of moths.

   Do you have a light?
Can you see the wings -- seared,
   ripped away? I cannot abide
so close. This is my body.

The juniper shimmers and rains
   its blue seeds -- small pyres
   in the dissolve
   the dissolve of
II.
Distant Relatives

Someone or something has blown dust under the door -- as if through a straw. An odor of tar, a soft rustling by the edge of the pale violet rug. Particles settle. No one sees.

My father smokes in the pantry. Or not my father -- I thought he looked at me -- but a distant cousin, digging in the garden at twilight.

I play for spades, silently at the kitchen table. Drinking tea as if I have always. The mail comes, then goes. But the dog bristles, unable to sleep, and the cat leaves.

Not to return. It is not the moon -- strange and vague, glistening on the lawn -- I say to you. It is this freight of dust. The cocoon of light from separate houses.
Departure

Small as my thumb, this St. Christopher, foot stamped "made in Taiwan." Glue, thick on the metal back, peels like eggshell. I have taken a box of trout. It lies at my feet, soaking through. And worse, I cannot stop driving. The white lines disappear into one white line.

This morning you told me, "dress the baby." Your sonata has been accepted, though slightly off-key, and in the wrong language. The map unfolds in the glove box. Sun rises above the dashboard, then splinters on the windshield through low clouds. Horseflies break on the glass. No blood.

I have lost my shoes again. I have lost the map. We left, are leaving Montana. No burial. No permission -- (Marie, have you gone out?) Here is my mother's shotgun, a box of shells in my pocket. It is time to sell the jewelry. I have been saving it. Look -- the lambs still sleep. There. In the field.
Taking Leave

A woman climbs on the train. Pulls
the hand of tattered boy --
a stray dog. Two hens, legs tied
with string, flop at my feet
as the doors almost close beside
the boy's dirty feet, a strap of light
left on the tar-papered floor.
He widens his eyes. He fingers
my sleeve with two fingers,
gesticulates -- another language.

I am fine, I say, very well.
For once, I admit this:
the ruined horses, indifferent
flies, tramping the grey color of fields
to graze. How do they know
to go on, senseless and crumbling,
steady as planks? Theirs
is the flood of dust and creosote.
The barns burned.
Letters from a Field

1. A loose image

A silverfish climbs
from a shoe. Sometimes
I go to the theater. The moon-
light fragmented by heavy clouds.
Blowing snow. I receive, unexpectedly,
$100. I use it to buy
what I need. The boys here
stretch and yawn like animals.
Soon they will break each other's
heads open and no one will know --
the usual glitter. I passed a row
of reddish houses -- a piano player
in every one. Dull thuds. I am no longer
afraid. In any event, one must speak clearly.
2. The dream

She rises from a dream -- the drowned
girl with muddy shoes.
Endlessly scrubbing the church
floor. Pushing back her hair.
Darkness.
Do you have a window? she says. Says
a plot, then? -- No, I say,
weeping. The black Christ
staring behind us. -- Only
the light from the door.
3. Return to the city

Lunar Eclipse

A dog, dull eyed, listens to a radio.
Begins a low growl. A needle, lodged like a bloodworm,
slits his intestine. The rivulet of blood widens,
widens still, filling the cave of chest.

Below La Bajada hill a camp of women
and photographers listen
to the airwaves, humming in rounds.
They raise a glass to the broadcast:

all the king’s horses
and all the king’s men.

And the moon lets go of the sky. Shimming
the edges of each razored pinon, scraping
the crown of each juniper, the sky falls
like any scavenger, dragging
the arroyos for small remains.

We make rice to fill the bowls. Build
dams against the horses and this haze.
The finch eyes us through her cage.
Her mate clasped on his swing. Look --
do you see them clutching
the rings, the stockings, the threads of my skirt?
Hieroglyphics

1. The initial seam

He shuts his eyes like a blind man
and searches for a source of light
among the figs and olive groves.
The body lost its thin rib bone
in an alley of rats, prey
to the multitudes. What fire burns,
burns inside the limbs? A dazzling light --
bright as fish. She wakes
and sees the body there:

To thee I give my own two eyes,
my throat of wood.

A jesus lizard flares up, bares his teeth
and curls into a seam of branches.
She weeps by the bank of the river.
2. The fish wife's tale

When she first saw the fish,  
stiff and luminescing between the planks,  
she recognized it as a sign -- her eyes finding,  
then losing its shape in the dark.  
And the moon washed it each night  
in a rinse of blue and silver.

She is asleep when it swims,  
when it seeps from the woody grave  
into her kitchen sink. From this pond  
it coats her dream in a thick yellow.
3. Song for the body

The sickle moon rises, dull marble, above the body.
Wind. The onions, insonolable, rustling:

\textit{see what you have made?}

She waits for the swarm to return.
Something undresses. No fins.
The fur scraped away. The soul rises
and slicks it eyes. Crows cling
to every branch. She watches --
the loss obscene.
At darkness I went into
the stone garden.
The moon’s shadow hung full
on the wall, a hood of lilac
below. If I could tell you this:
I have wed. I have found
the most brilliant flower.
Long ago, at this exact hour
my wreath, gathered
from the checkpoints of Nageezi,
fell from my shoulders.
Do you hear the drums beating?
Along the gate an owl listened
to mice scouring the dry leaves while
my lover stood at the wall’s edge.
It was the night of rigor.
My white wrists, my legs
of earth.
5. Night song

The garden disfigures her.
Morning glory moon and fossil deer
in a dead-end sky. The scarlet stain.
Where is the thunder that turns the dogs
into ash, the clouds into hail?
No birds. The grass full of snakes.
Little dead things fill the air.
Summer, 1972

The loteria table red
in photographs. My sister
and I dressed in gray. We are
ragged with games. With x -
o. A one-eyed jack rests
on the flagstone between us.
I hold a black pen. I sketch
him and axe and a crown. On the
back of the card, I pierce the spoke
of a blue cherub-rider -- another eye.

The cadaver of a fish
lies in a white basin.
It cannot “feel anything.”
We push a knife through
to slit the belly open, searching
for pearls or smaller fish
inside the chalky flesh.

My mother plays piano
in the back room -- a Chopin sonatina.
She is thin, her eyebrows drawn dark
on pale skin. Her eyes lined
with black. She pauses. Begins again.

My sister hums in perfect key.
The lilacs grow wildly and vivid.
We cannot see
the jewel-healed lizard
leap from the vines, the arc of tongue
against opened throat.
Autumnal

The sunflowers open in the yard
hollow-stemmed. Unstoppable
garish petals beside white stucco.
And the yellow jackets
are stiffening now, collecting
under the screen door in pools
of black: yellow: black.
I work on the front porch, sweeping bodies
into spaces between floorboards --
a game of checkers. No queens.

The fledglings drop
palm tree to sill, their wings blueing the screens.
Their shadows on the floor. How long is your hair?
How long will you stand there, blind
observer, armless figure? A brown dog barks
in the street. Falls silent
to a rush of air. My move. I un-
make you. Rain breaks
like mercury on the glass. Falls
cold against my skin.
Chiapas

A peacock perched on a wall swallows,
stares out into the thick layer of flies.
Dogs, patches of fur, pace the streets
and scavenge in alleys. They eye
the vendedores darkly.

A piebald goat digs, intently, under the wall.
Do you see the children watching
through the screen?
Behind the screen a camp of men carve
the shapes of guns in wood and blocks of salt.
A radio plays on a wood table:

My dove, turn back,
for the wounded stag leaps,
and climbs over the slope.

Elsewhere a tall man calls up the Internet
and searches for the pattern of dances.
Here is the last tango, or here --
the waltz with Mathilda.
Mira! Mira! the peacock calls out, awakened,
unfolding his tail in the night air.
Eve (on her way out)

"Thy immaculate self" was the message scrawled inside the apple's core.
Black ink. The seeds spilling out.
She thinks "sleep in the grass,
the teaching sheep." On her way out.
Her heart beating wildly. Thinks
"to get away." Her feet scatter
the leaves the snow
in the garden. A bat sliding overhead
signals her god's thin
remains -- the god-hooves.
We don't know about
the crown. She might have taken it --
celestial veins of light reaching
through the clouds. The middle ground
giving way. She will be marvelously famous.
The long years of naming begun --
Still Life, Winter

The river fissures under the bridge.
Impenetrable slate of flat
winter light. A fisherman
bending over a rail.

He carves deep grooves
in the wood, his shoulders curved
over sleeping fish.

Leaning
in the half-light, he hears
the absence of geese.
A form of suffering begun.
Circumstance of Sky

And there were other signs: trees burning through summer. The sky red and the lake. Below the bedroom window a dead swallow and the forsythia ashen. Already I have translated these into the infinite -- a kind of braille, known to the fingers -- the endless split and divide of cells. Without scale. It was as with any body: we turn against the altar, stand spinning as the sun loosens its hold, unfolding the sky.

This is the sky that we find: blue recast by each new star. Cerulean, cerulean. It is the light falling that the swallow moves through -- part passenger, part passing. We breathe, are breathing. No end.
June, Exploded View

A rooster's feet smell like warm leaves or grass. I collect this and other things, walking slowly into a field of jewelweed. I am twelve. My Sunday shoes shiny leather, black against white skin. I have found them -- twice today. One under the brass bed. One caught behind it.

I kick dust from my shoes. I kick locusts from feathery weeds until one falls -- a green iridescence. I think I have antlers for arms. How long do I wait there? The summer lambs staring, yellow-eyed and wiry. The restless ewes. The violets in thick clumps beside the fence I climb to watch near rain, still miles away.

A woman calls from the wooden porch. Blurred. This is the woman who holds the violets, the cobalt petals. She will be the woman who marries a farmer -- because the curve of her face, her hands are mine. Because -- didn't the lambs comfort her, the low bleating deep in the pasture, dusk?
Making Birds

1.

His neighbors pace the floor to a hole in the pine. The physicist cups his ear. For months he has been pulling the white birds down, in pieces of feather and claw.

He spends the days sewing grey quills to still bodies, labeling throats with pen. He uses an eyedropper of ink. Beaks are molded and baked in colors.

He is asleep when the eggs, impossible ovals, harden and grow on the inside. He dreams of a plane that hovers in a cloud. He dreams of an eye in a wing.
In the eye of a wing a woman stands
with a broom and numbers pinned
to her dress:

This one for Our Lady of the Closet.
This one for our Lady of Fatima.
This one for your shoe, black
and too narrow, the lace
in her palm.

He would like to hold her, to take
her home, smooth and unleavened
in his pocket. To feel the poplars bloom
slow against his hands.

He does not stop when she follows through the streets.
She rides in his car in a seat of hair. She rides
above the headlights in globes.
She makes a shadow of her dullness.
Sculpts her hair against the rain.
"Tell me about the birds," she says,
hands fluttering, but he hears a hammering slide
from her hem and break on the floor

where he is scrubbing. He is crawling
under the drywall, incessantly. He feels
his feet are glass and may break at any moment.
Then she would have to carry him,
a wooden bride, and stiff. Across
every doorstep.
A Blooming

A coyote twitches in sleep, dreams of birds
that float and rain. And rain
won’t quit tonight. Nets of rain,
flooding the grottos where
black hawks nest. Skulls of mice
wash from tangled sticks. A ribcage falls
into an arroyo; dead branches
flow past a stuccoed house.

A girl sits
barefoot on the brick floor.
She braids, then unbraids her hair. Sings
“catch us the little foxes.”
Pulling red yarn from skein.
She wraps it around her hands and looks up
toward the window.

In the next house
a man is handing beside a vinyl chair.
It is blue. The edges of his body, blue.
His shadow falls on white curtains. Falls
below him and the bare floor. The girl sleeps.

The water sky waits. A figure
lifts an envelope toward her.
An extraordinary flower is blooming,
has bloomed there.
Calligraphy

She has sharpened the silver
and folded the napkins into white
scarecrows. Rice paper unrolled
on the table. A pestle of fine
white china to grind pigment to ink.

She gardens as if she were grave­
side. Her back bent to hammer the crocus bulbs up
from the ground. She fills each hole
with a diagram of fire and thinks of a dark
suit -- the beautiful graveclothes.
The tulips flame
in a range of blue and purple,
burn into the earth and terrace.

Let the record reflect:
smoke rising up, staining the mesquite
with a pale violet. Her kneeling
before a circle of stones.
This morning the crows lit on the junipers

and began their matins,
their sharp cries ringing the mesa.
The trees show
their new selves,
    heavy with bodies.
I lean out the open window.
    I tell them anything --
grease fire. Grass fire.
The pantry’s bare.
Sun spirals through the branches
    onto their blue-black mantles.

Still, they call for their mates.
    How gleaming they are.
How black silk -- the tussore eyes.
    They come to cull
the imaginary bones
    I have saved and saved
from what is left.
    I scour the pans. I bang
the silver one
    against the house.
Whatever they are rises
    through the trees.
I don’t lie to myself:
    Last night the snow fell like ash.
A cold blue burn.
Saeta (Ave María Stella)

Arise. Come running, come riding to my house, cloaked in gowns of velvet and silver pins. The roan has no eyes. Her ears flatten against a bridle of fine threads and bells.

Descend. Come flying to my yard. Come driving, in a sled of crocodile and violets. Full of grace, you are the shining queen of web of compound eye.

This is my blood. This is my light. Give me your tongue. Let us sing to the paraclete, perpetual and turning, round toward the siren where the white dogs howl.
Acknowledgments

Cutbank (an anthology published by the University of Montana): “Making Birds”

“Letters from a Field” draws from correspondence written by Federico Garcia Lorca to his friends and family in 1929 while living in New York City.

I gratefully acknowledge Ann McGlinn for the cover photograph, taken in Los Ojos, New Mexico.