NOTES FROM THE WATER JOURNALS

By

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The poems in this collection have been previously published, sometimes in earlier versions, in the following magazines:

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I. Inheritance
Early each morning  

the last loyal farm animal  

comes in through the kitchen window.

Thinking of the trees living in close  

with the buildings and of places where the snow  

swirls thickest, places of less emptiness  

moving like the ghosts of grasseaters;  

I turn, but I am not where I should be,  

my face not weathered harsh and grained,  

angular as a German woodcut.  

Only the barn is where it belongs,  

whistling in the dry wind,  

and the farmhouse, waiting.

Somewhere else a cock crows.  

Somewhere else a farm hand stirs.  

Somewhere else chores are waiting.  

Here there is only the sun  

coming in through the kitchen window.
The Man in the Cellar

With the honor of salt
and the complacency of lakes
my gray father in a jar
weathers the wind of the mausoleum.

The man in the cellar
has been there for years,
a pale friend of coal dust, roots,
and the black mush of old potatoes.

Sometimes I rise to the empty rooms,
cornered in dust, and listen
to my father in the strange wind
that comes and goes like an inmate of darkness.
Outside, old voices move among their words
like exiles seeking the child
who moves the dark songs of dreamplanters.

There is a song of ice
that fills the pockets of warm bodies,
a majesty that descends,
singing to a bed of snails,
when the shape of the world changes.

A small turbulence of terns
hovers,
skimming the changing surface for the small
survivals it carries like breathing coins.

There is a song of fire
that frees the breath of plants,
a death song of animals
that brings their bodies back again
remembering sunlight and substance
and how they came to be held
in their own stomachs.

There is a song of air
sitting quietly on the bed of the tongue,
listening to the wind, waiting
and planning the one good thing
it will say in the lives of the blood.
There is a song of earth
that fills the distances with Here, Here
and Remember this, a steady chant, a hum
in the delicate wires of wheat.

The rocks I open with slow fingers
become dark loam calling to roots.
I begin by palming the seeds.
I have a handshake that grows
its own neighbors. I have a foot
that steadies the other side of footprints.

There is a song of change
that has lost its memory.
Everything will be living differently.
Everything will be living.
Thoughts at Turtle Lake

One floats among the waves,
relaxing like driftwood.
One crawls through the warm, slow comfort
of familiar mud.
Another is digging near the bottom.
He is busy confusing the water,
dredging up dark clouds of silt.
He believes too much activity
is dangerous near the surface.
The disturbed sediment hangs.
Heron

the neck is a question
of swallowing whole lives
stay calm
in this sliver of slow flight

sing like stiff reeds
breathe like tide
eat what the water hides
stand quiet like seed

when you eat fish you become an ocean
the moon swallows your breathing
The Care of Ice

sharp trails of blue light
suture the wounded ice

the silversmith tamps a last key
the glassblower closes a cage of light

dry mounds of buffing compound
drift over the frozen lake

deep in the mud
a sleeping heart murmurs

still playing his tiny flute
the giant wanders off
Old Cotter came out of the marsh dragging a bum leg and a burlap sack filled with dead stories. He sat by the fire, and as he explained how each of them had died, spasms shook the bag, furred shadows slipped out, and each of us felt something attach itself to our feet. The next morning we traveled west. By noon we had reached an understanding. We traveled on through quiet towns, holding our breath in our hands, listening to the songs of the rain and imagining the fire burning under the fog-bound marsh.

I pause for a moment by the river and slip my hand in the current. The cold nibbles at my fingers while the sun warms the shirt on my back. I walk through dust, sweat rising from my skin, cooling me and collecting small stories of the earth and wind. Darkness tells them to stay. Sleep gives them a home.

A network of mingled currents, the long roots of marshgrass, the paths of snails and mud-lives, traces of the water journeys. At night, beside the wet veins of the earth's body, the stories of our lives call in our first tongues across the water.
Opening a place in the air,
an owl drifts over the fresh snow.
The white-hooded stream
thrashes under the soft arch.

The long night calls with a voice
darkened by hunger
to the dream which has already gone home.
Mice weave strange, delicate
patterns on the snow. A coyote
howls across the new hills.
The soft, wet hollow below the ridge says
don't explain this to anyone.
As the animals wake
their shadows move deeper into them.
Wearing a necklace of bone pebbles,
hunger arrives. The scraping of dull knives
leaves with the angel of dark noises.
The light at your feet
sleeps quietly in the dust.

Softly it begins
the tender violence of staying.
Dreams of mating and fire.
Another hermit comes down from the mountains.
I, too, am not your father.
The Widow's Cat

Had I responded differently to your gifts
perhaps I could have learned more.
I paused a moment to stroke their small, warm bodies,
but in the end I buried them.

Each night sleep stayed away
I could hear outside the window
your child-like screams. I wake now
to a new quiet, a deeper calm
in the silence friends have become.

I move about the house making sure
of the places I have found for things,
less alone with private fears than public loss.
perhaps now I can say, for better reasons,
I am not the woman I used to be.

And if tonight, Confucius, you find happiness
brazenly by moonlight on a garden wall,
some other quiet woman may see you more clearly,
and by taking you in, let herself out.
Instructions to the Miser

I. Adjustments for a Certain Failure

There is a right way to do this.
Begin by understanding
the animals with rocks in their heads
in which little men
are chiseling out a likeness
of animals with rocks in their heads.
Follow them to the bordello.
When the bandits arrive
the sullen women who live in the tables
will answer the soft voices
of knife wounds. Someone like you
will want a room.
You are preparing a safe entry
into the family of loss.
You begin riding your hands
over a dark, wet thigh
in search of another ambush.

And the blue veins of the lovers,
the murmur of hands, the silver flutes
swimming in moonlight, the chimes
in the story of the clock's honeymoon--
do they come to nothing, miser,
but a bag of bone dust? A wallet of tongues?
Believe then that the night, with its lepers
like the ragged fringe on its evening coat
and its vagrant green eyes
greeting you like footsores,
is only another scar away from profit.

II. Frame for a Solid Object

Our lives in disrepair
have something to say to us, they say
see if you can become a victim.

Carrying your basket of stones
you stumble towards morning,
voice wrapped in a ratchet of crows,
calling to mute journeys.
There is a village in Italy with cold eyes,
a town in Germany with its boots on.
Do not let your pockets empty you.

Go to the shipwreck. Enter the ruins
deliberately. Your accidents
will not save you, no matter how long
you have waited for them.

Your suicide has value.
Bring it with you. Hold on
to your losses.
When you come to silence
there is no disaster,
only the tools. Build places
to hold your changes.
Move into them. You must do this
after the dead have finished speaking,
which is always.
The Point of His Music

(An Elegy for Kenneth Patchen)

Because a cultured sleaziness developed
in the love-strung strings of the loose violin
the desire for more serious music (Eggs
come from eggshells) made her unicorn's point
droop as the melody ran out
into the other room before he died
where there was a man with a little green blackbird
standing on his head watching them
as they ate sauerkraut with their oldest forks
poised like fond memories
at the edge of a serious squawk.
Lopez does not try to stop the ants. They come into his house and they go under his clothing and Lopez does not try to stop them. But when Lopez goes to the village for supplies the people believe he is a very brave man to suffer like that and not to complain. Lopez has many friends because now the friends of Lopez have something with which to bargain for attention in the villages of their friends.

Lopez goes home and his beans are doing very fine. After a while the ants leave and it is time to harvest the beans and many people have come to see the ant man. Lopez does not wish to be rude but Lopez has beans to harvest.

That is the way it is with ants.
That is the way it is with beans.
The assassin opens his violin case
and a waltz hobbles off
in the direction of the nearest ballerina’s
ivy-hung balcony.

Meanwhile the horse piano
grazes quietly, nuzzling
down into the last green strings
of a vagrant summer.

Somewhere far off,
on the distant horizon perhaps,
the William Tell Overture
lies snoring between the blue toes of winter.
The Old Woodcarver

1.
A hunter carves out a hollow in the split, steaming carcass of a legend.

The perfection of brown, racked in bone-velvet, rises like a cedar ghost.

The old man calls and the heartwood opens. The animal enters.

2.
Bear rises from stump. Bear is family. Bear is old. Bear is the stumble of winter.

Bear is a maternal grandfather rooting in thick sleep. Bear is a hole in the mountain.

Bear is log-beater, bark-grubber, claw, tooth, and hump. Bear is rumbling into father.
If hollow had a name
it could be owl.

Eyes like black caves
where night
tears at pieces of the day.

Surrender comes quietly,
a monk with a sharp bone
and many books in his cave.

Gliding into himself, each victim
answers the same question.

Sleep and the moon
in the bellies of wolves
moving down the canyons
like the lost words of shadows
passing into their own darkness.

Sleep and the nocturnal carnivore,
shadow turned talon and gone,
a pierced tendon, the thick wet trail
of the more fortunate, and again,
the deep, steady pumping
of a dark organ.
5.
The blade of the knife
passes through water.
Sullen, well-fed bass
drift in the hollows
of sunken trees. Turtles
glide back into green water.
Wall-eyed pike in the eelgrass.
Redwings in the cattails.
Long shadows on the mud.

In the black grass the faint outlines
of a robe. The snail prince
dreaming in the green night.
The blade of the knife
passes through sleep.
Guilty of nothing more than our dreams,
we enter the cellar; deviant lovers, men with big hands
and desperate wives, children with limbs half-formed . . .

The eyes of damp earth and leather-mold,
cobwebs and butcher knives, see in us
their neglected lives. Nerves reach out
for the pleasure of tying the body in its skin.

At midday, light sits on the rotting staircase.
Near suppertime, evening drags the bleeding body
through the window. In the dark corners
limbs begin moving deeper into the black damp.

We reach for each other in the darkness.
We are the missing children.
II. Notes from the Water Journals
It is not so hard to die.
Think of the nightbirds
drinking from broken mirrors,
an army of sparks scattered
over dark water. The black
flash along a cold steel blade
is a river caught and polished.

Think of home as a dry field
of wheat stubble, grasshoppers
drooling tobacco juice in the heat.
A quiet farmer's wife
sweats another ring into her dress,
her melancholy husband scuffling home
from rust-infested corn.

Inside each of us
there is a dream
that does not belong.

Soft piles of dirt stack up
against the mortgaged buildings.
The last of the dusty anthems
drift over the dying fields.

Think of a lizard sleeping
on the stone rim of the world.
The Washington Coast, 1938

In the country of narrow light
birds gather behind the forehead.

The doors in the legs of shore birds
open and small men with sextants
step out and begin searching
in the sand for hoofprints.

The sleepless riders dismount
and peer over the edge of my eyes.
The new world remains lost in fog.

A white sail rises from the horizon,
docks and prepares for departure.
The horses board ship
and the sails fill with birds.

High in the mist a thin shriek
reaches out ahead of itself
and drops out of the air, a dreamer
plummeting into the years of not knowing.
The Oregon Coast, 1946

That hand which is sleeping in my hand begins reading my bones. Wherever I go someone is taking my place by leaving.

Whose tears are those
small oceans in the air?

Floating ashes, charred poles,
a wreckage of floating scars.
Black stumps march into the sea with seagulls on their shoulders.
Cormorants watch from the rocks like refugees. Far off,
the thrum of a whale.
South Dakota, 1951

In the country of snails and blackbirds
the lives of waterbugs flicker over the surface.
Reflections shimmer and pull
on both sides of my eyes.

I was searching for the place
I had lived in. I came to a path,
a small opening in the sadness.
I crawled in and the night
crawled in after me.
Eastern Montana, 1951

Rain. Night comes down over the long marsh, sprawled green and oozing like a splayed caterpillar. The hollow cry of some nightbird hovers over the neck of the sleepy river.

Two crows and a grin fold up their wings and melt into the darkness. Mud-skinned and bristling with swampgrass, the languid river sinks deeper.

In this country of mud and dark water morning is a breeding heat, a gift of blood.
The Missouri River, 1951

We buried the body at dusk
and camped on the hill above the river.
Darkness crawled into our tracks
and filled them with sleep.

We woke to the last howls of wild dogs
as the flatboats ferried dawn across the river.
The horses shivered off from shore,
our voices soft in their ears,
hands smooth on tensed muscles.

Halfway across, it began raining
and what we still carried of the night before
slipped into the dark river like coal dust.

If there were any other way to go on,
our last things, tied like bundles of rope
against the bodies of our animals,
might not grow so heavy with loss,

but we have all that we know with us
and all that we need
moves quietly beyond us, calling,
leaving signs in the mud.
Iowa, 1955

In fading light I move
easily into shadow.

Here I am
grinning in a photograph,
a young boy with a shotgun.
I stand by the gate to an empty pasture,
proudly holding a pheasant's death,
coming into my own.

The framed light
grins at me from the past
saying

Come with me.
Italy, 1959

I feel a thick, dreamless sleep
moving tighter against me like a bad smell.

My body waits like a beached whale.

Everything I have needed fades.
Everything fought for grows trivial.
The winner of the war between left and right
wanders off alone. The loser of the final dark game
closes his eyes and feels nothing.

Home is where you were
each time the sadness
curled up and slept.
Spain, 1961

Night gathers the lumps of darkness
and begins burning out the last threads of light.
The forgotten hopes sleep unnoticed
in the shadows along the path.

I have seen things floating
to which I was once attached.
I have hoisted the flag
of the legions of lost sleep.

I have kept nothing but my body's reason,
simple as breath,
and it answers no other questions.
Whatever place I have come to
sleeps in silence. Fog drifts
over the still town, swallowing smoke,
and leaving its cold breath on the leaves,
it settles slowly into the sleep of the fallen.
From the comfort of this numb quiet
memory drives a rabble of orphans,
dim children playing in the ruins.
Nightbirds drink from the water
gathered in the cracked sidewalk
before the hollow cathedral.
Thick-bodied Turkish boys
stand in the muddy canal
grabbing at eels. The fog
moves in and out of my thoughts
like the tenuous moist signals
held for a moment in a mirror
as the last wet breathing
prepares for sleep.
Sicily, 1967

From somewhere deep in the black waters
a body rolls up out of the darkness
and a small flash of light
reflects from the place where its motion
arced and let it fall.

Hanging on to a gift
thrown from a distant body,
perhaps itself a dying reflection,
the body breathes and rolls again, rising
in a slow, distant pulse.
Wales, 1969

The fog thins and a golden haze
falls to the streets and lies steaming
among the cobbles. If only we could believe
the children spilling from the warm houses
could be saved by our travels.
If only the lost light
were near enough for the blind
to follow its warmth.

If only we could put down our best feet
like roadmakers of the farthest heart
following instinct
and the wisdom of that country's body.
Portugal, 1972

It is not so hard to die.
Only ignorance is easier.

The same path we traveled
led somewhere else. The same breath
had another life in its parts.
We could have taught ourselves
not to notice.

It is hard to plant the small slivers of light
those who have traveled in darkness
find caught in the folds of their bodies.

The air comes to the water
and the water takes the air into it.
The water lies shaped by the earth's depressions
and the air comes with quiet wings.

In the countries of light and motion
the unending death of less
travels down the road between us.
More than we thought we could know
falls behind us again and again
as the light turns and bends
along the new roads.
Western Montana, 1976

High in the mountains a threshing
of fingerling trout,
silver needles
weaving a tapestry of light.

A nipple rises
to the belly of a warm hand.

A thought stirs
in the mind of its next partner.

Death moves out of its shadow
and its eyes have changed.
III. The Funeral of the Moon
This is the wall that dreams into you.
Add your stone to the guest list
and a memory falls. A debt
drifts in under the hand of the wind.

After a while, turning back, you might gaze
upon the red burden of fear pounding evenly
into the cavity of the chest you have opened.
A small rodent scurrying out of the way
could be your last refusal.

Years later someone will point to you and say
People have forgotten to live there.
He will not notice
that you are not a dream but a way
of sealing the packages of pain.
The hour of dust and grasshoppers
crawls over the hill above the orchard.
White smoke horses drift in the still air.
The animal in the compost heap
gnaws at the straw gate, anxious to ride
its heat over the dry fields.
The storm sleeps fitfully,
twitching in a dry hole in the stream bed.
Holding on to the ledge, I remember
how she appears in the evening,
her sultry men trailing her
like thin pieces of clothing.
I have severed my escapes.
I have dreamed up a life I could lead
into the empty rooms of old age.
I reach for the next curious notion
crawling between extreme fingers
and find it already separated
from its body. I take it
into my confidence. I read to it
from the book of excuses
which I have memorized in order
to believe I have not used them.
It calms me. I do this
and I do this and I am still
not over. I go on
gathering in roads at night,
letting out destinations by day.
The thorn in my skull
is a foot on the grounds of the circus
where the genitals bark and call
to new cages. I wait
in the tents of my favorite traitors,
a thousand tiny losses
skewered to my inner skin
with nerve pins.
The plate in my forehead
twirls on a thin stick.
I walk among the ropes, learning
to entertain my thoughts of falling.
One of the children of history
wants to become an angel. The same child
meets you on the stairs of your future.
And as the minutes of that meeting
go on repeating themselves
they become the only ones left.
It is just that you have noticed something final,
something which has been here all along,
and not knowing what to call it
you call it closer.
The Dark Bird in the Dream of an Old Woman

1.
A silent black flame.
Mud and shadows have done something with its claws.
It could mean a brother come to live with her.

2.
Once while gathering small brown stones in an open field Ramon told her, "Only the angels have come here to die. The rest of us go on living as if something depended on it."

Another time, with the hunger living close in an old jar, she grew quiet and began listening. "We are like fences built by strangers. Bloated cows sleep in our mothers' houses."

3.
That was before the last revolution,
the one that turned, like the wheat,
back to the earth for its dreams.
A hollow sentinel guards the meadow.
The shadow of a frog on a rock
moves off
into the quiet evening.

The frog is dead.
I sit on the rock.

After a while my shadow leaves.

My father was a child
whose skin gathered in slack folds.
His fingerbones were twigs.
Something in his body
had discovered the shadow of milk.

I grew intimate with spoons.
I carried a bleeding moon in my sleeve.

They are waiting where we cannot find them.
They are the dead who have lied to us.
Their chisels have our names in them.
At night we sleep on their pain.
I am trying to imagine my fingers
growing fond again of my hands.

4.

A crow flaps and scatters
dry frog bones.
I sit on the rock and imagine
my life as a snail.

Somewhere in the darkness
sleep is calling like a lost name.
Versions of the End

The end is in a coma.
It will never recover.
The beginning sits by the bedside
and murmurs.
Various people come in and forget themselves.

Window wells fill with blue sand.
The pale hand of the silent stranger
attaches itself to a friend.

In one of the ceremonies
someone is about to step into your life.
Both of you are thinking
that this has happened before
and wondering which one of you
is supposed to take the step
and what will happen if you both do.

It was smoking a picture of darkness.
Down the corridors of smoke
a piece of glass was walking.
I could see that it was only a way
of guarding its words.
I said I was ready to hear them.
It saw through me.
in the shuffle of dry leaves
hooves echo down a row of thumbs
on the scholar's grave
a dead sparrow

at sunset
high in the trees
a flock of knives
preening

an old man with a lantern
digs up the darkness
and drops its sleeping eyes
in an old leather pouch

before morning
black pools of rainwater
will close
and reopen as mirrors

you only know this
because you have fallen
Salt Drift

One of the changes begins inland—
elm trees and women with shawl-moss
draped like slow ravage over their shoulders.

Leaning into the shifted wind of old men
clambering one more time into boats,
the women stand on the shores of loss
and watch their shadows thin as oars
move into the liquid dark.

A spider web shivers on a pendulum.
An oar weathers in an empty field.
Another dream moves out to sea
and glows, bodiless, in the sparkling waves.
Evening of Small Fires

1.
Dusk moved in the marsh
as he walked the long fever
of his travels in the sea.
She was the white figure
burning in ice at the glass door.
He searched beneath a wing
for the smoke of entry.

2.
Long ago he gathered his collection of shadows, deepening into the haymow,
and rode a donkey cart past the huts and the hovels, past the rapacious
sluff of owners hungry for wings. When he was gone they placed what was
left in the bucket by the dry well. With the next rain his childhood came
back to him. Soon the fevered sea began rising. White fish swam before
his eyes. He began to move his wings in the darkness. He sang and the
bubbles caught beneath his feathers. One of the white fish followed him.
He put her in his penis and waited.

3.
For ages our mothers
have not told us of the dead walls
that have not fallen far enough.
We come to the chair-gray people
we could have lived in and we cry.
They don't understand. They think
we are unhappy. They think
we have made a horrible mistake.
They hold our hands and pat our shoulders
until we want to go away
and then they think we are dying.
We try to tell them and they bring more ice.
In our dreams we turn blue
and fall in the dust,
the taste of salt on our tongues.
When the fever breaks we come out
and wait. Fog appears in the marsh.
Small fires burn in the dry places.
Someone who has lived in the sea
will be waiting on the porch.
Before the Snow

A window opens at the end of my hands.  
An owl is perched in the saddle  
on the gray fence.  

Winter walks with me like a child.  
The mute lives of ash  
stand frozen in moonlight.  

Slumped against the barn  
like a drifter planning a theft  
the wind waits for footprints.
Leaving the North Country

Empty now, the cabin on the hill
stands in shadow, and the sound of water
lapping quietly against the old dock
climbs the hill and wanders in the trees.

Each evening the long red stretch
of the world’s edge reaches out
over the tongue of the lake.
Clear pools of water
sparkle in black stumps.

The old shoe speaks to the chair
about dignity in the deep blue
of approaching night.

Dreaming south
I remember a twilight with swallows
darting after insects by a trestle.
They disappear into cottonwoods,
darken and return as bats.

An ice lantern shines in the north,
flickering blue and calling,
and a cartload of furs
clatters over icy stones.
Snowlight sparkles like a row of stars
from the black ice in the horse’s eyes.
I crouch into the canoe and push off from shore, 
the sky over the cold lake turning gray. 
The wind sends a shiver of white over the water 
and the wind dies. 

I stroke once and gaze up at the cabin. 
Winter watches from a cold window 
with a coloring book and a box of crayons, 
all but the white one broken.
Some Winters the Wolves Return

When the pack comes down from the high country
I hear blood stammering in my veins.
I feel the ice melting in forgotten rivers.
They come back to us because we need them.

It is too easy to think we have gotten away
from our four limbs reaching for common ground,
too easy to ignore the furred board of a dog's body
thumping against firewood in the back of a pickup.

Planting their gray bodies with steel seeds,
we protect our few frightened animals
from their hunger and ourselves
from our own dark needs.

Still, there are times I come upon them alone
and the circling hunger moves in a single animal.
Standing deep in my human tracks I take aim and fire,
falling in the snow as the bullet enters.

The sudden lack of motion the body stumbles into
leaves a silence at the end of the path
and a part of me moves out from the change,
turning four-footed to the hills in search of family.
The Funeral of the Moon

The moon is a globe in the bottom of the boat. A harlequin lowers the washtub onto the black lake. It floats solidly as if the route had been laid out beforehand. A small wave washes darkness into it. In the morning the washtub bumps against exposed roots, holding it like a hand.

We have only to promise our lives we will not go on like this. If our hands are empty it is because we have not raised them properly. Above, in the darkness, a thin curve of light.

We have everything to lose again.