



How a Bullet Behaves

*A Poetry Collection
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Subtext

What I said was

“Could you pass me some brown sugar for my tea?”

And what I meant was,

“You are the opposite of everything alive
and I know that when you feed the swans
in the park, with bread crusts from your lunch,
you’re really hoping that they’ll choke
and die
and stop being so much
prettier than you.”

What I said was

“I hope that wasn’t thunder,
it’s been such a nice day.”

And what I meant was,

“I hate your guitar. It puts puncture wounds
in my dreams and I would like to roast it
(like a suckling pig) with an apple on its neck.
And then, I would eat it, with a fork and knife
and every time you rubbed my stomach,
like a lamp,
I would play you a song
about how much
I hate
your guitar.

What I said was

“Yes, I suppose the olives are a little
overripe for a Greek salad.”

And what I meant, was
“You are a hot cup of Hemlock tea
on a warm day in Greece, and I think
you execute philosophers in your spare time
because your jealousy is the poison of cold snake lips
that you use to kiss with.”

What I said was
“It’s been nice catching up.”

And what I meant was
“I don’t know why we’re friends,
we were never very good at being lovers,
and I know that you keep me around
so you can stroke your own ego
while I pretend to care. You
you
you
are the same stale song
played out on repeat.

What I said was
“I don’t understand.”

And what I meant was
“I don’t understand
you.”

Deconstructive Criticism

In the dark,
the tall machines turn eerie,
like resurrected dinosaurs.
I imagine they are weary.
Their heads are bowed low,
the posture of deference
or defeat.
Tonight,
perhaps it is
a little bit of both.

I think of people native to our country,
tanning animal hides to make shelters with,
of pioneers sweeping loose dirt from
the floors of their dugouts,
of barn raising parties.
I think of all the people who never thought
that it would come to this,
that development could ever mean destruction.

In this city,
there are entire lives conducted
between a cubicle and a television set,
without once bearing witness to the splendor
of the stars.
In this city,
There are twelve drugstores,
five Wal-marts
And not enough forest to stave off the apathy.

In this city,
there is a child building a fort
out of scraps from the dump.
The base is the X
of two ancient, fallen birch trees,
lashed together with strips of tire,
peeled like the single spiral of an apple skin.
Then, the walls of rotted plywood.
Then, a discarded length of chain-link fence.
Time slips away from him as he fills a moat
with buckets of water
which, within hours, will be soaked
back into the earth from which they came.
The mud seeps through the knees of his jeans
and stains his skin.

Not far away
the construction site is quiet
with the absence of the foreman and his crew.
In the trailer, their hardhats
hang like eggshell halves.
Out front, a billboard touts
the pre-fab condominiums
that will fill this space.
On the sidewalk is graffiti
in the shape of a pine tree.

People who live in brownstones
rarely pause to think
that stones brown in color
are really just bricks
laid by masons whose overalls
are stained with their dust.
In this city,
a child sees the heads of tractors
through the trees behind his fort.
Like Don Quixote, he imagines they are giants
waiting to be slain.

Lullaby

Every Wednesday night,
Mama takes the train
into the big city
to sing jazz to the rich people.
Every time,
I ask if I can come and
every time,
she tells me no.

Mama likes to wear sweaters,
and long skirts that cover her legs.
Her hair, she pulls into a French twist.
On Wednesdays, Mama wears
a green satin dress
with black lace that tickles
at the flesh above her knees.
When her hair comes down,
it curls around her face in a red haze,
like something alive.
On Wednesday nights,
Mama looks like a movie star.

It's early Thursday morning,
one or two,
when she comes home.
When I ask her to sing to me,
Mama sings church hymns,
high and sweet,
while her hair gleams red
as an old rooster's comb.

After she takes the late bus home
from the big city,
Mama comes into my room
and even though it's dark,
I can see the glint of her dress,
the moon tone of her bare legs.
Mama pushes back my hair
and then she sings; not God's music,
but the low, smoky sounds of a world
that comes to me in bits and pieces.
I close my eyes,
afraid that she will see their reflection
and stop because I'm awake.
With my eyes sealed shut,
all I can do is listen.

Amber

Daddy, watch me.
Watch me pirouette a worn patch into the rug,
watch me make a soda bottle tornado,
watch me cling to the leg of your trousers.

She is a dime store tragedy
of dirty fingernails and frog residue.
She smells the way children smell
before their scratch and sniff sweetness
gets rubbed off.

Daddy, I'm hungry.
Wake up now, it's dark out
and I can't reach the light switch.
Daddy, why does your soda taste funny?

She is missing two front teeth
in the photograph
posted on the precinct bulletin board.
Her hair is worried into a knot
above her left ear but
she is smiling.

Daddy, help me paint a picture of the dog,
help me wash my clothes for school tomorrow,
help me..
A necklace made of macaroni, strung onto a piece of yarn.
A crumpled pair of Spongebob underpants.
These are things she left.
He walks the short length of the apartment,
touching them like religious relics,
as though they might hold the power
to save him.
To save her.
When night comes,
he opens beer bottles on the scarred countertop
and thinks of her unanswered questions.

Daddy, why don't I have a furry chin like you?
Do dinosaurs come from Alaska?
Where does Elmo go to kindergarten?
Daddy, how many hours does it take
to drive to heaven?

Growth Spurt

As a child,
I had an imaginary friend named Edgar.
He wore a black derby hat
and a green checked sport coat.
He was ageless,
but somehow older than I was.

Edgar was braver
that I could have hoped to be at six.
Some days, he went outside naked,
with only his hat perched atop his head.
He philosophized
with the bats in the attic,
and never covered his eyes
during *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*.

I searched for a year
after he disappeared.
His empty sport coat lay crumpled
on my bedroom floor,
beneath his abandoned hat.

After Edgar left,
I climbed the attic stairs,
my face ghost lit by the flashlight
clutched between my slippery palms.
I stood beneath the peaked roof
and felt the warm whoosh
of bat wings beating air against my face.

Fourth of July

The young girl watches the fireworks
from her front porch,
writhing snake-like into the night.
The ground is littered with the hard, clear confetti
that burst free when the light show first began.

The father balances his daughter on the edge of the porch railing,
watching the mingled lights of emergency vehicles
blend into the color of nightfall.
A firefighter hefts a hose
toward the snake-licking flames
that blew out the windows of two cars
in the intersection.
He watches the ambulance,
waits for the paramedics to roll out a stretcher,
but they don't.

The girl yawns back against her father's chest,
the fireworks still dancing
behind her closed eyelids,
spiraling into the sky.
The show has finished.
All that's left is the strobing afterglow
of blue and red.
The father carries her upstairs.
She says her prayers,
and falls asleep.

The Good Ship Lollipop

When I was four,
I danced ballet
beside slight little girls
with pillow-smooth skin,
whose costumes hung on bony shoulders
and creased across concave stomachs.

I gracelessly contorted my body through the positions.
Dark curls marking me amidst
wispy spun-sugar ponytails,
I missed cues,
moved apart,
out of sync.

Our costumes were nylon and itchy white lace,
bright against my gypsy-child features.
I didn't revel in it,
didn't like the sequins or the lace,
but at four years old,
on the painted stage floor,
I learned how to move.

Cheap Thrills

Billy dared us to jump the fence,
and me and Clayton did it.
That's how we ended up in the amusement park
after all the machinery had groaned off,
like a whole pack of elephants
hitting the ground at once.

Without the hocus-pocus lights,
everything looked grey.
It was like the whole damn place
was a used up corn husk.

Billy says we was supposed to steal the sign
for the Tilt O' Whirl ride,
but I told him no.
He says
Whatsa matter, you ascaired of the carnival?
I says
You seen it here at night?
I says,
This don't look like no carnival to me
and no way'm I stealing from a graveyard.

Sour Grapes

When I was three years old,
I choked on a grape.
I was surprised, but to be fair,
I did try to swallow it whole.

The culprit was the texture.
I couldn't stand the way that grapes burst
between my baby teeth,
like overfilled water balloons,
the thin strips of skin intermingling
with the pale, watery entrails.

My mother was a registered nurse,
but her first reaction was still
to lift me by my ankles with one hand
while bringing down the other against my lungs
in frenzied, wide-palmed thumps.
The pressure of my blood made me feel like
an uncorked bottle of champagne,
but then the grape slipped free.
It rolled out off my tongue as though
I were an oyster giving up a pearl.

Afterwards, I refused to eat grapes
unless they were peeled.
When no one volunteered
to do this for me,
I peeled them with my fingernails;
small, painstaking strips.
Eventually, I gave them up altogether.
I felt deceived by how easily their rubbery resilience
could be crushed.

Hero

When James Taylor was on Sesame Street,
he had a moustache like my father's.
He was singing about smiling, and that
was it for me.

James,
at four years old, I didn't know yet
how many sharp edges you had,
just that you sounded like the way
warm laundry felt on my skin.
I loved you with the fierce platonic worship
of a child.

As I got older,
you were as much stability as I could ask for
in someone I'd never met.
I held out hope that you'd work it out
with Carly Simon, and tried to figure
how someone could come back from your kind of damage.

My four-year-old self felt the betrayal
of the affair with drugs that landed you in rehab,
but my adolescent self was beginning to understand
that kind of pain.

James, I was twenty-four the first time I saw
your bones and skin pick up a guitar onstage,
and it was the kind of magic no magician
would betray the secret to.
I waited twenty years to see you walk across that stage,
and savior might not be the right word,
but it's the first one that comes to mind

Dad

Your hands held a putty knife
in October, which tasted
of smoke, sweat and cider.
(In the kitchen, mum sliced apples.)

“This is the best part,”
you said, slapping spackle
over holes in the powdery white
sheetrock. I remember the sound
as we scraped the excess away.
(We’d picked the apples together,
the month before.)

When I was four, your hand slipped
against a saw, and you drove one handed.
We were at the hospital
before I realized anything was wrong,
and you didn’t scold me
for forgetting about my seatbelt.

The hospital smelled like sting,
and a doctor saved your finger
with eight stitches of blue thread.
I remember the brown crust of iodine
beneath the bandage.

A saw tooth stayed behind
between finger bone and flesh,
stitched right up into your skin.
“That part’s a secret from mum,” you said.
(Mum, who in October, was making apples into pie we’d eat for dessert)

Now, you say “hold the ladder,”
and I do. It shimmies until my grip is tight enough. From the kitchen,
I can smell the autumn of apples in pie.
Your hands slip-scrape the putty knife across the wall,
and mine,
they hold the ladder.

A Poem for the Protestant Widow

It's about the distance you achieve from sanity
when you burn the hung sheets
of a Protestant widow
on the backyard clothesline.

It's about the scattered braying
of the Protestant widow's cow
galumping after you,
across the buttermilk-blonde hayfield
while your left shoe slips off your foot like a wet trout.

It's about the slingshot-snap-pinch
of remembrance that the Protestant widow does not, in fact, own a cow,
and you are actually being chased through the hayfield
by a large, ornery bull.

It's about fear that bears the name
of the Protestant widow's lover, who is chasing you
in a bile-colored pickup truck
and carrying a shotgun.

It's about the celestial voices
descending from the heavens
to tell you that maybe burning
the Protestant widow's sheets
wasn't really that funny,
you're going to be picking
shotgun pellets out of your calves
for a long time,
and you might really be going to hell
for this one.

Time Keeping

When we eclipsed the sun
for the final time of the millennium,
I was weeks away from my sixteenth birthday.

The August heat that year
was quiet and full.
Each night, I would return home
from my summer job,
the day's sweat dried
to a faint, granular crust
on my skin.

I don't remember the eclipse.
On the cusp of sixteen,
the magnitude of my aspirations
threatened to split my skin.
I spent much of my time
willing myself to remain whole.
To say I was preoccupied
would be an understatement.

I don't remember the eclipse,
but I do remember the electricity,
the building tension
of existence drawing breath
to sing out the century.

Escape

Autumn is at her heels now,
rolling up the fraying remnants of
past summer days.
She clings to this time of transition.

Unwilling to relinquish her grip
on the sanity of happiness,
she lies awake in the elbow of night
to be aware of each second's death

Etched in smiles and tears are
midnight rides and clandestine kisses
beneath blue and red lights.

And still these moments slip
like wet sand through her fingers
and the witches' castles that they leave
behind are sadly lacking in tenants.

Constellation Scars

In my fifth reincarnation, I was a warrior
of Troy. My legs were
rubber band snap taut beneath my tunic
and my eyes were black
with all the blood I'd seen dry
on the bodies of friends.

In my five hundred and fifth reincarnation,
I was an Italian baby girl.
My eyes were blue from looking so much
at the sky, and my mouth was an Arkansas tornado,
tearing up the roots of all the words I tried to say.

As a warrior of Troy, my body was
a constellation of scars, some grey
with the left-behind metal of an enemy sword,
some so fresh they were the raw, smooth pink
of the inside of a woman.
There is music in the sound of marching men.

As a little girl,
my brother taught me to make the fat bellied bodies
of letters in cursive and my grandmother
taught me not to laugh in cemeteries.
It was not a time when anyone
taught their little girls how to wage a war.

The poets like to say it was about Helen,
but I've seen her face
and it didn't launch those ships.
This is not the filmy stuff of fairy tales,
and Helen wasn't the queen
everyone would like her to be.
It was just a game of chess that was already in check
and Helen was only a pawn.

In my five hundred and fifth reincarnation,
I grew up
to be a warrior. I came of age just in time
to join the female rebellion, and they thought
we were becoming victims.
We were just making waves
after so many years of being told to lie flat.
You should've taught your daughters to be
soldiers.
In truth, it was a war that began
long before my blue eyes and tornado tongue,
was a war waged by Margery Kempe and Virginia Woolf,
by Audre Lord and Eve Ensler.
Maybe my next reincarnation will spit me out
as someone like that, but for now
my face is blurred into obscurity.
For now, my face belongs to every woman
walking down the battlefield
we call the street.

As a cause, we knew it was unworthy.
As Trojan warriors, we strapped on the armor
anyway. The weight of it
is like another body lashed across your back.
It's true, we should've known better,
but we were all
too goddamn tired to be afraid
of an ugly wooden horse.
Real heroes never try to claim their titles,
so I'm not bitter that it's not my name
that they remember. I stood with men
who had stars sliced through their backs,
swords bare and helmets at our feet
because we knew it was the end.
The poets never write about the smell of that much death.

When they talk about this day,
let them remember not that it was a battle
that we lost.
Let them remember the recklessness
of constellation scars,
naked swords and empty helmets.
Let them remember that this
is what glory looks like.

How a Bullet Behaves

I am small enough to go unnoticed,
deep in your pants pocket
in the crevice where pelvis meets leg.
People treat me like a lady
because they think that I am dangerous.
They cradle me in limp hands
and hide me in machines
that look like tools,
hard barrels of varied length and size.

I am not a lady.
I don't like being hidden like a fugitive,
I can take care of myself.
The chamber is dark,
like the outskirts of space
and just as cold.

I have nothing
but time for ideas.
I am apathetic about my own inertia,
but I know that there will be a moment
in which I break free, in wingless flight.
It's what I've been saving my motion for.
When it happens, it will be a bad day
for someone else,
but I am not a serial killer.
I sting like a bee; only once.

This is not what I chose.
No one asked me what I wanted.
If they had, I would have told them
to give me wings, but it's too late
for that.
I can feel the heat of a hand
closed around the grip,
and I am ready.
Today, I learn to fly.

If I Were a Tempest

Satellites would register
the ferocity of my voice.
My cupped hands would swallow ships.
I would part, then come together
like a falling piano hitting the ground,
a mess of broken keys reassembled in the froth.

You would stack sandbags
and evacuate your kingdom
for a horse that could ride against me,
some aquatic beast to shield your shoreline.
I would come anyway,
a vengeful storm aching to break,
open chested,
against the beach.

Grace Notes

The heart monitor sounded
like a metronome
keeping $2/4$ time.

You
were out of place,
shackled to your bed
by machines that did
your body's work,
by that heart monitor
that made it sound like
your lifeline was as steady
as a Sousa march.

You told me once
that your name should have been Erratic,
that your mother only called you Eric
because she got the spelling wrong.
By your hospital bed,
I counted your heartbeats,
watched the even mountain peaks
on the digital screen,
and prayed for any other time signature:
 $3/4$,
 $5/8$,
something we could dance to.

Letter to Dead Lover

What is morning like where you are?
Does the sunlight split into slabs of citrine,
like the segments of an orange?
Is there horizon?
Is there sky?

Here on earth, I try to harness
what I think you'd miss:
the smell of pine tree sap, the sensation
of warm laundry against skin,
the bellow of the bells in the clock tower.
I send these things to you wrapped
in the paper of my yearning,
but like boomerangs, they always land
at my feet.

Is there something up there that makes you feel
like you felt when you moved with me—when we were one
body, running for the nearest bomb shelter,
trying to escape the force of our own blast?
From your height, our world must look leopard spotted,
with clouds of smoke erupting at uneven intervals
against the canvas of the atmosphere.
You and I were not the only combustibles.
Is there war where you are?
Are there guns?
Are there grenades?

Here on earth, I saw a man grind the head of a pigeon
into pavement with the heel of his spit-shined shoe.
I picked up the body that the pigeon used to wear
and wept. I cradled it against my chest,
and when a passerby cautioned me against disease,
I told her I'd already seen our kind of plague,
and it didn't come from the body of a bird.

Where you are, do people cradle pigeons?
Do they cradle each other?
Do they take the bones of what someone else has broken
and see something worth saving?
Are there nightmares that hang you with a noose
woven from the fibers of your own regret
and if there are,
who is there to cut you down?

Last night, the noose of my own nightmare
hung me over the wreckage of a junkyard.
You were there, and I asked you
if this was hell. You told me
it was Earth.
I tried to puzzle-piece it back together,
and I asked you if there was hope
where you are
You handed me the broken-bodied pigeon
and as I cradled it,
I could feel its heartbeat begin again,
matching the cadence of my own.

Need

You,
sun-whipped reddish-brown,
and tasting like
the watered saline of sweat,
limbs weary, eyes half-lidded
with exhaustion,
were the home that I returned to
that night,

and I,
all clingy skin against cool cotton,
aching for the imprint of your face
on my curving neck
have never known such peace
as you and I.

Psyche Kills Cupid

There are few things more tragic
than love
that has been broken.

It has no form, but I recognize it
in the choked-off sound of her voice
as she siphons her tears through the holes
in the telephone's mouthpiece.

In the face of such devastation,
I am a fire extinguisher
matching wits with the Holocaust,
I am Ella Fitzgerald
performing at a school for the deaf.
I am the notice Romeo didn't receive
in time.

Twisted limbs and tangled promises
screech against each other,
smashing into something
that looks like abstract art.
Like the twin towers did,
love falls in on itself first,
before scattering debris over
rubbernecking bystanders.
It is a wreck too brutal
to look away from,
but we all observe from a distance,
as though it's a disease that we could catch.
Still, we are transfixed because
the demise of such a love,
even when reduced to scraps,
is a testament
to the fact that it existed in the first place.

Sunstroked

The water laps at my skin
like the tongue of a lover,
raises bumps of sensation on my calves.
Later, the sand spilling
from my dry bathing suit betrays
my affair with the beach.

Ansel Adams, to Patsy English

You and I
in the mountains,
are the same in all the ways
that are seductive.

At home, Virginia
tends to rosemary and basil,
coaxing life from earth.
I send her
no photographs from this trip,
worried that she might see
you in the chiaroscuro
of the sharp mountain ridge
against the pewter sky.

We make love standing,
your back grating against
calico stone
so that you can see the skyline
over my shoulder;
through your eyes, purple,
orange, blue,
and in photograph, only shades of gray.

You are already black and white,
dark hair and eyes
against skin like dandelion milk.
Your resolution is too great for film
and lens.

Moving Day

The dark spot on the sun-bleached bedroom wall
was in the shape of the way you sleep;
legs spread eagled,
one arm draped protectively across your eyes.
I wanted the security deposit back
so I had to repaint.

Instead of helping me pack,
you were hundreds of miles
away,
in Mexico
with a whore.
You left me in a hurricane,
and you never returned
to claim your wreckage.

When I packed,
I cast your ghosts into a pile to burn:
stray black socks,
bookmarked novels,
the dishes you bought because they were blue.
I choked on the ashes while I
dragged the brush across the wall,
not stopping until my
last
best
memory of you was smothered.

Idolatry

Microphone in hand,
he cuts a question mark
into the crowd
of writhing flesh, black t-shirts,
moist skin. When he pulls back,
their hearts fall to the floor
through the slits in their chests.

Weather

Today is seventeen different shades of grey
and I sit, forehead pressed against the clammy windowpane,
waiting for the pregnant clouds
to drop their ilk.

The students cross the campus
dressed in gym shorts and sandals,
defying January's limp attempt
at winter.

There has been so little snow
that I can almost forget that this
is New England.

In October, on my wedding day,
it snowed so hard that the power was out
for a week.

Afterward, people told us stories
about loved ones who'd married
in hurricanes and tornadoes.
They told us it was lucky
to be married in bad weather,
and we'd scoffed at the idea.

When a dry spell evolved into a drought
that chased the tail of autumn
all the way through February,
I began to wonder if, perhaps,
the universe had conspired
on our behalf, after all.

Today, with my forehead printing smudges
against a windowpane of a university building
in New Hampshire,
I recognize that our lives are not free of struggle.
There are times when we are broke
and angry
and sick,
but later, when the periwinkle glow
from the television slips
between my eyelids,
I wake to find my husband's hands
clasped tight across my stomach,
anchoring me to his chest like a lifejacket.

When I wake up this way,
I can believe that two days before Halloween,
on our wedding day,
all the luck of the year
was bound into an October snowstorm
that just happened to fall on us.

Memory of Home

My hair, freed
from its elastic
spills from my head
like a bristly creature from the woods
where I grew up.
I feel freer now, too.

Stagnant

I hear them every March,
the disembodied voices
of the places I've never been.
They descend like a mosquito swarm,
the itch of their stings insatiable.

America is a wasteland.
Each year we eat more
and move less,
turn the volume up
to drown out the warning.
We are succumbing to a sickness,
and I am not immune, but
I am not oblivious
either.

In the stagnant July heat,
time is a limitless mirage.
Summer is seductive
with the illusion
of eternal youth.
Only at the mouth of winter
do I begin to feel my bones,
count the steps that I have taken.

This time,
when the rivers and lakes
crack free of ice,
I will not remain
only to be bitten by
the ghosts of old desires.
When they call on me,
this time they will not move on
alone.

Wayward Bodies

The bird hit the windowpane
in a blur of brown,
mimicking in sound
the beat of a deep, heavy drum.
His neck was broken, I was sure—
shattered like the safety glass
of a car windshield.
Still, I scrambled off the couch,
and once outside
found the bird calmly seated on the grass,
flightless.

His eyes found mine, and in that moment,
I resolved to save him.
He allowed me to cup his body in my hand
without complaint,
and I carried him
along the perimeter of the yard,
soothing errant feathers.

Given time,
he began to once again balance,
round, brown body
on scaly grey legs,
all the while appraising me
with the ball bearings in his eye sockets.
Deciding I could be trusted,
he began to open his wings,
shaking free from the trauma of collision.

When I placed him on the lawn
again,
he tested the ground with a few hops
before the scamper-lift of flight.
Gaining altitude, he dipped low
so I could feel the wind of his efforts
before coming to rest on the highest branch
of a nearby tree.

I was left to the parameters
of my pre-rescue reality,
disoriented on the ground.

Phases

Among things that have been lost,
beneath the debris
of all the skins I've shed,
is the ability to make my life
a constant mystery.

Costumes

The he in the dream
wears the face of a painted devil.
He stands in a circle of snakes,
each held in place by a knife through its tail.
He prods them with his cane tip,
crouches low to marvel at the groans
Shuddering free from beneath their rippled scales.
His mouth cracks into a broken smile.

The snakes yawn their mouths wide,
pull against their blades and lift their heads off the floor.
At first, he fails to notice that they've begun
to slip their skins.
They move like parts of the same serpent,
and each one begins to birth a woman
through the cavern of its jaws.
They shed scales
and sprout limbs in fast-forward: accelerated evolution.
They scatter quickly, rising onto their sculpted legs,
speaking thick words in an unfamiliar language.

The he in the dream is reluctant to move
in the wake of their departure.
His chest is cold; he grips his cane with both hands.
He leans forward and touches one of the empty snakes,
stares hard at its clouded, vacant eyes.
A flake of his painted face peels free
and falls to the floor.
The he in the dream realizes that he is,
for the first time,
on the wrong side of fear.

Tangled

Some mornings,
a bomb ticks down in my head
and blows chaos that spreads
like radiation sickness.
Unexpected sounds
make me duck and cover
like a battered child.
The shackles of the sheets
prevent me from getting out of bed,
or remembering how to turn on the shower faucet.

There is nuclear winter behind my eyelids.
I lie still and wait.
Then, the surviving thoughts emerge:
Sit up
Comb your hair
Open your window
and remember
that the sun is still where you left it.

Ageless

I will have a birthday soon.
It's something I try hard
not to think about.
I have imagined myself
at many ages, but the actuality
of each one always eclipses
my expectations.

When I stare into the horizon
of this coming year,
I see a blank, white burn.
My inability to project myself
into the future is blinding.
I spend most of my time
walking a tightrope in the dark,
and every time I feel the cut of wire
beneath my feet, I exhale.

Candles on a cake make me nervous
the way ticking suitcases
make TSA workers nervous.
I'm never prepared to be
the age that I am.
It's always a poor fit:
sagging at the chest, pinching at the hips.
By the time I break it in,
it's time to struggle into the next one.

Growing older is the only bad habit
I can't seem to shake,
but time—unlike water—can never become stagnant.
I could let my birthday pass unheralded,
but it doesn't need my permission
to shave away the years.
Maybe this year, I'll throw some candles on a cake
and take a long look.
Then, I'll empty my lungs
and make a wish.

Nursing Home Ballet

Margery forgets that she uses a walker.
We find her in the hallways,
clinging to the wall, trailing timid footsteps.

We introduce Clea to her husband once a week,
when he visits.
She looks up at us with question marks in her pupils
as we blot her lipstick and thread her arms
through the sleeves of a fresh sweater.

The building heaves with the labor
of interconnected machinery.
The oxygen tank hoses tangle with catheter cords,
straining against the clammy grasp of death,
peeling back its grip, finger by finger.

For Walter, the shower room is a boxing ring,
and we deflect his fists with open palms
while the lukewarm water
slips through the loose wrinkles of his skin.
Right jab, uppercut, left hook, knockout.
We hold him upright by his bent elbows
when he breaks the surface of reality,
dripping and bewildered.

The nursing home is never quiet,
because the people who live here lie awake
with bones pressed too tightly against their skin,
trapped in withered shells that used to call themselves
carpenters and postal workers and dancers.
These people lie awake because they know
that the death coming for them
is less abstract than it has ever been before.

When Henrietta's call light goes off at three AM,
I enter her room quietly.
I look into her watery eyes and I hold her hand,
because this small comfort is all that I can offer to someone
who is waiting for the curtain to fall for the final time.
I calculate the number of ticks that it will take
for the clock's second hand to hit sunrise,
and I count them to her until her grip on my hand
becomes less desperate.
I try to read her fate from the wrinkles on her palm,
but I can't, so I count the seconds
as they syncopate with the rhythm of her breathing.
The moon shines an empty spotlight on the floor tiles,
but the ballerina's legs are broken.
There is nothing here but oxygen tanks and catheter bags,
call lights and damp pillows,
and people,
who used to know how to dance.

Hollow Solace

Tonight, the sun sets heavily
upon your absence

Your kitchen counters are lined
with Pyrex-encased casseroles,
as though food is the closest thing to comfort
that anyone has to offer.
We drink cheap liquor
and everyone is laughing too loudly
to stave off the specter
we call silence.

We buried you in the dress
you'd been saving for the occasion.
We cried over your open casket,
then carried you into the church,
where the priest delivered his
hollow solace.
It was probably
a lot like you expected it to be.

Now that we have put away the ceremony
of the day,
I cry in short, unexpected bursts.
People hemorrhage platitudes
as though what they are saying
is out of their control.
She's in a better place.
She would want us to be happy.
I can't help but think that what you'd really want
is to not be dead.

The evening frost etches a prickly landscape
onto the exterior of your windows,
and I wonder if you have written me a letter
in a language I don't understand.
I press my forehead against the cold pane.
"Don't worry," I say.
"None of us will allow you to be gone."

Mending the Hive

Blessed are the beekeepers,
who have mastered so delicate an art
as navigating the mood swings
of animals who sting.

As a country,
we are still learning
the nuances of grace;
how to dance and not stampede,
how to soothe and not provoke.

The beekeepers
are not afraid,
and so an enemy becomes an ally.
In their hooded suits
they cross over
into foreign airspace,
moving not against the bees
but with them.

Anteater

You
are not a creature
of languid-limbed grace.
Tail fanned and furred,
trunk corpulent and muscled,
nose tapered to a wand—
you are a hybrid of vagaries,
hinting at any number of species
to which you do not belong.

I have felt as you appear.
I have lived between
the parameters and pigeonholes,
and perhaps things would be easier
for both of us
if we were more easily classified.

Despite that,
I love you for your ambiguities.
We are all more than the sum
of our varied parts

Transcending Gravity

At the edge of the world,
Margery unrolled her wrinkles
and shed her skin.
As she took her first step in the sand,
everyone turned to watch her,
smooth and pink like an India rubber ball,
still new and glistening in the sun.
They talked about her in a shallow chorus
of whispers.
Some were jealous,
but most were in awe.
They reached out their hands as she passed,
traced the roughly cut outlines her feet made in the sand.
I am beautiful for the first and last time, Margery thought.
Then, she curled her toes over the edge
and slipped off.

Down Side Up

In the relentless jaws of insomnia,
I found a swing set in the night.
I wore sandals and no coat
against the smoky autumn cold.

I gripped the chains like the arms
of a stranger.
The wind slipped beneath my clothes
as I swung in a high, perfect arc,
to the rocking chair rhythm of the ocean.

In the dark, it looked as if the entire earth
had pulled loose from its imagined axis.
It felt like the whole planet was a grass stained child
log-rolling gleefully down a hill.

The honking of a passing car
caused my chains to buckle,
and the plastic seat tipped me forward.
I landed heavily, with one leg twisted underneath,
and the ocean's tidal rhythm drained back
to where I'd conjured it from.
Yet still, for a few moments more,
the wild earth tumbled on,
like an Etch-a-Sketch shaking free its mistakes
and starting again.

How a Bullet Behaves

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