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Tumult Blossoms: Poems

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TUMULT BLOSSOMS:

POEMS

by

Elyse Rachelle Arring

Bachelor of Science
University of South Dakota
1998

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the

**Master of Fine Arts Degree
Department of English
College of Liberal Arts**

**Graduate College
University of Nevada, Las Vegas
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Thesis Approval

The Graduate College
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

April 4, 20 03

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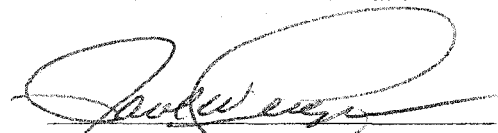
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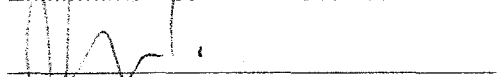
Master of Fine Arts, Creative Writing


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ABSTRACT

**Tumult Blossoms:
Poems**

by

Elyse Rachelle Årring

Dr. Alik Barnstone, Examination Committee Chair
Professor of English
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Tumult Blossoms is a collection of original poetry that examines the formation of identity and the factors that determine it. Identity itself is treated as a fluid entity and explored in various guises, from that of the individual to that of a nation or species, with special emphasis placed on both migration and evolution. Within this exploration, close scrutiny is also granted to the relationship between human beings and their environment.

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*stuck in bodies
we didn't ask for*

Whirligig

Men work
below the window
with pickaxes, shovels,
& sweat in the midday heat;
the desert sucks moisture
from their pores, their dark hair
and eyes brand them.

A beetle lands
on the glass shining
like water, finds it hot
and hovers a blur
of wings treading sunlight.

Metal clangs
at dull intervals, & the sound
of earth migrating. It, too,
is dark and wants
to float on air, whirl
through the stratosphere,
cool itself in the ebb
of this terraqueous globe.

The Gospel According to...

Deborah

There's something beyond
the body; I want to enter

the wilderness
of that beyond.

Each day I've been given
is a test

of what I can endure.

I can't stand

to be inside

my own skin.

I'll be delivered

I just need the next...

Sometimes the worms can drive you mad.

They won't let up.

I didn't ask

to be given life

my mother

didn't want it either

But here I am.

There's something beyond the body.

I've seen it.

I'm sorry

I can't stay here with you.

I'm waiting for deliverance

My punishment from God
for being
born

is just to wait so long

to give pain

a name and call it life

Thomas

She wants to be a bird.
She told me so last summer
when we were climbing,
thought our hair had got caught
in the clouds.

Her arms spread out
she leaned far off the cliff
and I thought of her small body
plummeting.

But she hovered in a swan dive
perfectly in space, and the air
cradled her skin, a bright hammock.
A bird.

She wanted to surpass her body,
become weightless feather and hollow
bone that could sing itself larger
than a church.

She floated above the chasm,
cosmos swirled around her,
I couldn't move but to stare.

Jim

it wasn't til years later I realized
most of the troops were either poor
black and white kids from the south,
black kids from the inner city,
or poor white trash like myself
who didn't have the connections
to get out

one day I got a haircut
from the local barber who kept shop
that night the whole place was blazin
our ammunitions turned against us cuz
the barber was a sympathizer
and drew maps of our base

when dark mornin was quiet
I curled up and closed my eyes
thinkin'a the fields back home
and how they *moved* with the slightest breeze
hidin the crick where we caught trout
toads and crawdads under long days sunshine

an remember how I talked to you then
wishin I was back there and not always
knowin how I got to where I was anyway
what I did wrong
an why you and the devil was fightin
for our souls
an why you weren't winnin

we were lambs first
but when the sun got low
and everything round turned red
all was shadow below and the sky
so beautiful we didn't know anymore
who the wolves were

Marta

nearly perpendicular
to Earth's broad curve
I feel its tug
from each radius of our shared axis

I stand completely still
the slightest unbalance would tip
me into gravity

tell them

Earth wants me
to lie my length down
next to it
to feel my curves
mold to its
from crown to toe like all the lovers

its bulk would be
so weightless next to me
its gravity a whisper

stuck in bodies
we didn't ask for

Our building squeaks with shoes
from the wet city, where
melancholy throws its laughter
from high walls.

Each day I find out more
how wrong I am in this life,
try to purge the sweat of someone
who calls from a body holy
with what it's given. The skies
broaden; every muse wielding war.

Frail

[I]

The smell of dogs and plumbing saturate our empty flat;
it's hard to stop thinking in plural.

I still keep your ring in my pocket, feel its weight on my thigh—some days
I forget, collect a pile of phone numbers dangling matchbooks, before trivial things
remind me—even the cockring lying in the parking lot, Jimi Hendrix secretly dying
on the hi-fi decades later.

*But I loved you like a burning building,
too blue and mercury to save.*

*I held you like rain water
slipping back to earth.*

Marx called language *agitated layers of air*, but our words
were sweet rocks that sank and fermented in boards beneath our feet—
plurality was a bottleneck, jagged and sparkling with obscenity.

But he didn't see the way the babies
cry in their cubicles behind wire windows, that first or last gasp agitating
all of our throats, the way we cry because the babies swallow
our adulthood as we pray between jaded sheets.

*I needed you like a sinking rock
needs algae to pull it under to its soft,
obscure bed.*

He didn't see us when we laughed and screamed,
when in drunken belligerence you layered the air commanding
Get your ass back in bed and don't hide
my razorblades.

[II]

The laughing woman says I believe in miracles, I see them
every day—she Godmothers a thousand
broken babies as they sputter out of dark wombs.

We paint with layers of light
among buildings that are still beasts, or start to roll outside
the window like moored vessels sending
up white masts against the haze.

*We talk to God in our sleep and bargain for an ark
while pooling light falls from our fingers.*

*In the shower God
is in our hair but we're not quick
enough, runs to the sewer
to be filtered back into silt.*

And it layers us, too, falling in the shallow canal
informing sea with our salt— island goats
watch our kayaks and sea pulls us away, scared children
in the sun's hottest mile.

*The babies who survive
grow to build God and worship art.*

We pass a dumpster proclaiming Eat More Art, and know
the God we've built of yielding light commands
each labored stroke.

[III]

Our skins belie the same atoms as ore from pilfered earth, these same
layers of matter that spill into mountain, sink into bone, rise

*in a cave breathing dissolution so brilliantly
young ladies believe they've been violated.*

We command matter layering our skulls to rejoin
flesh, climbing as bodies wait
to join one another in the immediacy
of our unspoken—we wait to eat words in tentativeness
of beginning, the obscenity of end.

*Our caves a stark burden, a fire building flesh
from years of waiting in the warbled city.*

*Our lives a burning cave from which
we extract memory, blame, fruit in its waning.*

a partnership

one man gesturing emphatically through his thick accent
to trees hulking over a lush green

the birds in the trees
a squeaky washing machine

the men chatter, question,
while the child teeters haphazardly on indecisive legs

the ball in the tree wanted transcendence,
a change in perspective

the child wanted it so.

What It Names Us

i.

When a man is no longer a man.
 When I take his identity;
 his boots, his sweaty ballcap or suede
 elbow patches, his haircut,
 & he reaches for his political arsenal & finds instead
 a groin crippled by shrapnel, reaches for his wife
 & finds I've stolen her as well, garters & all
 —how can he still be a man—
 & when I take his things (shrapnel & all)
 into the restroom marked LADIES
 & the security guard follows
 or when Sir becomes my second name
 (& embarrasses my father at the garage)
 & when I develop new names on escalators
 at the public fountain
 or under refuge of a juniper
 in the green red desert.

ii.

But I'm lying

beneath brambled air craving your quiet,
 with trees whose buds play
 the clef of sky and burled branches,
 wanting back in.

The weight of air settles

into my clothes, as into the wrinkled garment
 of mountain crawling up from desert,
 at whose base cactus flowers open.

Our friction defines us

like the tangle of pansies, colors blurring in the periphery
 of who touches whom, and does it matter
 that the girl's bare skin is scarred
 with sunlight, and what those dark passages name us
 in this world.

Tumult Blossoms

I dream words
 and the man downstairs
 dreams his own.
Mine shine on walls,
 crumple in trash cans,
 scrawl on trestles
 as morning lifts us.
His are a beacon
 calling a lover home.
The woman next door
 dreams her baby's words
 in the night hoping:
 she won't be afraid of dogs,
 she'll tell her abuelos
 that the days are young
 and to burn a bright star
 on the horizon for her return.
The girls across the courtyard
 are my family.
When we wake from our dreams
 Sunday afternoon
 we'll eat together boisterously,
 try not to think about the coming week.
Freeway unfurls
 to a 4th grade classroom,
 where the pupils don't read,
 speak the same language or have textbooks,
 won't *know* each other.
The mohawk, tattooed arms, and pierced face
 races in a red Camaro to school
 to study the science of politics
 in the city of sin.
Stern face rushes to hospital bedsides,
 old women crankily adore
 as their visitors' chairs collect dust.
The quietness of the house when everyone has left,
 even the man fixing our cars and lamps
 in exchange for a room with cluttered balcony
 facing the wash.
The morning news over,
 animals asleep in their respective plots
 and left again with only private words.
The man down the street
 dreams his next fix.

The boy in the yard dreams
of airplanes and forgets
what his mother's told him.
A woman in a car dreams a bigger house
and of leaving,
and as the light turns green
her car is so quiet
she sits a moment longer.
A young man in his quiet cell
remembers crying babies
and dreams himself holding them
in a bathrobe in early sunlight.
The woman who paces the sidewalks all day
kneels in the empty church
in that same light
and dreams herself another place.

Cockroach

stuck on his back
in the corner of my kitchen
somehow didn't make it home

through the pried-away board under the sanctuary cabinets
blow gently toward him his legs and antennae wiggle slowly
dogs sniff at him yet he lies resignedly

debate about whether to toxify him with the spray I bought
surely if he didn't die
he'd carry poison back to his family's nest

couldn't smash him lying so helplessly
another primal creature whose death could weight my soul
simply for dislike

should I be merciful
and swat his agonizing life to its end in linoleum
could I bear to flip over and set him free

is he a messenger for some queen
or a mother with babies lurking nearby
is he integral to his own society

or have comrades left him unable unwilling to help
maybe a suicide mission
exiled from his community for unspeakable pleasantries

certainly if there were more I would
scurrying out of drain pipes
or basking in the cereal boxes

when I see them dash across the floor
terrified by some emancipated elation
I quash their dreams, a frenzied god

why such debate over this humiliated wretch
I do my morning chores stepping gingerly around him
dishes coffee dogs to feed

squat and study his silhouette against white tile
a piece of crumpled tin foil lies nearby
glinting in the morning light

The Great Divide

Your voice used to surprise people.
I knew how it changed with climate
like the genus of trees, or the weight of air.

You longed to be an island
with the weight of a pebble.

We tumble, cackling and scolding
down the gully carved for us,
destinations elusive regardless of planning.

But tomorrow we could roll into ocean,
or be scooped up and dropped back on the mountaintop
still half air or ice.

Float. Icicle. Polish pebbles for posterity.
Shine under the current that pulls us
through ripening earth, through tarnished words.

You know that one day tomorrow will be too far.
An island in a pond, a pond on a volcano, you'll sit
round and placid. Dammed and silent and cold as January.

Abrasion

Because I am a word
 connoting a library of concepts, please

do not mistake me for a mountain.
 Each day I wake as water

fumbling over awkward stones;
 glance over the frowning rim of coffee and there

hanging on the wall an image
 I recognize as your framed and

jilted life. The verb *to print*: skin
 knit tightly by skin, imaginary wound

littered on a page, breathing the gridded
 magnitude of a life too common and complex for

neat type of a book to capture. Staccato
 overture scrawled red, yellow, green, layers inked on

parchment, pressed in the rolling
 question of a crank. Etched chaos

relieving the plate, fabrics gathering
 self-pity in their layers, while inks like

tanager and bee-eater press themselves as sky
 upon the page. And the sentiment—bold

vulgar stain that could not summon
 words for *It matters*,

xanthous puss bubbling up between
 yielded scrape—instead finds

zenith in a life ever less spoken.

She Said It Looked Like An Egg

The flames must have been beautiful:

 oranges,
 reds,
 blue-blacks weathering the night,
charring the bookcase where they'd lit candles
waiting for Mother.

 But when she arrived, she curled up in the smoke

turning to scratches in their throats,
dissipating in the atmosphere, disappearing
as Father had into the extraneous tropic of Florida
with his new wife and children.

Sister listened to idiots babble near the tracks, felt herself toppling forward
off the edge of the world past their aunt's farm;

 Brother was so small.

The older cousins enjoyed their innocence,
dragging them through endless fields and pastures empty,
golden,
horrible with garish sunlight.

Took her to the edge,
butt of a shotgun at their heels.

 Her child-eyes wide took in everything

 that dared breathe in the vast nothing,

but couldn't close fast enough
to capture the image of the dog's soft head
still intact, before they pulled the trigger.

In the rolling green of northern Minnesota,
above the slight Scandinavian lilt that still creeps out at times,

she said

It looked like an egg.

August

Women hobble past in uncomfortable shoes.
Her sneakers hover

pointing toward the dusty slate of desert.
They both squint into afternoon

haze blurring the horizon. She adjusts
her brakes at either hip and proclaims, "Indians

used to dance until it rained." He turns
from her side, stepping out into the sky, and lifts

his tongue to it, waiting.

blue promise

America Lies Sleeping

Where I was a child
the sky was crisp
and bluer than my eyes.

The bleached skull
of prairie bison
wears deadly blackened horns.

The sky that holds us
also owns us
while we measure our space in it.

At the end of each eon
the universe ceases
to exist because Brahma closes his eyes.

A coyote lurks
near the freeway exit and watches you
each day for a year.

Blue Promise

I don't know when my family came to America.

Ellis Island wasn't what it is now, liberty towering
for the likes of my grandmother to collect trinkets.

To dream of standing under it in awe,
count spires of her crown
and get lost in blue-green wake of a ferry
or deep folds of the lady's skirts.

When they set out with wagons.
Oxen domesticated millennia prior.
The cities had already begun.

Chicago would reign as midwest queen,
extolling her virtues of fish, steel, farm,
lumber, traincar,
rearing the margins of a young nation,
a matriarchal Margaret I
molding her offspring to govern a united land.

They brought that spirit into the stillness.
Driving for sunset until it felt right;
the expansive blue promise of Dakota.

The cold is a different one
with no longhouse, no town square.

Four sod houses on a creek would comprise
the new Norwegian settlement.
Three children, few livestock,
squabbling or smoking or terribly dear
grownups scanning an endless horizon,
no wind in the grass or trees in the stillness
or even a bird to perch in it.

And no wonder that ruins
of Leif Ericson's Vinland, land of grapes and iron,
found nine centuries late in New Foundland,
whose banks house long-migrating codfish
with red marbled head and black barbelled jaw,
still inhabited by fishermen, tundra ice, tree rock.

The Viking would be first to sail

from the east after Beringia submerged,
in hulking lapstrake ships, farmer-become-warrior,
sailor, soldier, another patronymic oral history
whose language would cultivate and reckon,
whose gods battled giants.

This northeasternmost tip of an immense continent
would follow me to Vegas and its glittering,
trash-strewn desert more than a thousand years later.

That history should plague me in this dark age of immediacy.

And a letter to a grandmother
who should be dancing under liberty on her next, ninetieth, birthday
should lead me all these places, having only set out
to make a poem she would be proud of:

I don't understand you kids and your poems these days, they don't rhyme.

On the farm, above the swift red dells,
in the settlements grown to picketfence towns,
in the home because your legs don't work so well anymore,
in the climate only northern blood can bear, prayers so often do.

Korčula, Yugoslavia, 1989

at the edge of beach lay a wall skirting water.
we fished from salvaged sticks and twine,
with a shiny lure from market, off the rocks,

catching nothing. my cousin was eleven; but I
was thirteen and not astounded
by the women's bronze breasts on the sand.

we drank warm coca-cola and drifted,
with dazzled foreign tongues, into the pull
of the adriatic, among islands that teemed

with someone's hungry goats.
bread lines were short, and sometimes
there was milk, even eggplant or other exotics.

sun settled each night into the vast world at my feet,
and somewhere there's a photo I remember
of my mother settling in it too from the same rocks.

but what I meant to tell was the afternoon
that was so startling I fell off the wall
into the canal, my clothes and skin
wet among scattering fish and clawed scavengers.

Driving Home

Initially mistook
the black cow for a bull,
then wondered why she was
alone in a field, under fledgling
October dawn so near the road,
its black rubber remnants
and ruddy crimson stains.

Alone on the road
I am also mistaken
for a bull, watching her
wondering if she's happy
and why I didn't become
a mathematician.
The corn stalks have dark
shriveled heads like a thousand blackbirds
teetering, gossiping and hungry,
balanced weightless; feather and hollow
bone. How easily I could crush
those bones between callous tips
of finger and thumb and how many
times it's (undoubtedly) been done.

Trucks pass.
I notice one girl's glazed
eyeball and yellow-tagged ear poking
through the metal vents between glints
of blue sunlight. Should I
have been a soldier? People's bones
aren't so fragile, but they chatter
in the same rows on telephone wires.
Now's the time grasses turn
straw and rust, and beasts call to each other
over flat rows to where green survives.

12-year Journey Around the Sun

I.

One year ends and another begins with no one
I know having seen God. But God is in the burning
building. Loved-ones bend like reeds

or reshape their particles into new
versions of themselves. My lover assembles
a new campstove on the living room floor.

Each of us has seen God. Our incognizant globe
turns one year further into a new century, turns past
our expectations to a new realm

of sweet ruin. The wind pulls sandstone
from a crumbling seabed. My body steps one day,
one decade closer to my own grave, struggling

not to squint past it to the universe's
red future. But even as I document, the stolid sun
changes its name to a new day and we twirl

around it in rays peeling
off layers 'til Jupiter's above again, the first
in two centuries. Rivers freeze over

their trout populations, and no matter how fast
you hold things (say the pocket watch
your father left, strung by gold

to memory), they drop from the hand and splinter.
This seems a dark celebration. It is a chain
of light tethering us to change, whose propulsion

has brought us to the very spot
we now stand, admiring crags in
frosted sunlight, the harboring reefs raised

from water, compressed by the nurturing
weight of air and heavy history of fossil. Broken
the clock whose tick invites

the moon, the sun, the one tock which spells
a new year, and wonder who they were that first discovered

time, first documented the pirouette of Earth, the orbit

of a moon, their onward-churning dance around the sun
—as if all planets and their moons were partners
in a ballroom waltz, fathers twirling small daughters

in circles 'round the cavernous hall, training them
for later years of courting—how it felt to be a father of time
in the shroud of history. We are guests in time

and bow to it as to a king, unquestioning, while it bends
to a legend. Even the atheist, the tyrannosaur
dug from this sediment, and the fuming

volcanoes on moons of Jupiter, are chronicled
by the life and death of one man who might have been
savior. Years add on themselves,

numbers so plain
for the weight they proffer, and I'm sometimes thankful
for my failing sight. The blur between streetlight

& starlight, between moon & river, I watch
the edges of things go soft and forget
the shine of the watch I bore

that wore them. The world cries in the shower again,
because it's inadequate; but somewhere
a great light is shining, and a child learns revolution.

II.

He gazed from the base of what tidalite mountain,
and measured the distance of stars against the faint brow of it, pressing
against a mostly black sky.

One day love would make me want to forget,
reconcile the rift between science
and the afterlife, believe in mutability of the soul throughout ages.

October, the year
of our lord 1992, the Catholic Church of Rome would pardon the heretic,
and still the moon was hauling in the neap tide,

and time was sweeping
round the sun in such convincing rays.
The same Rome that appointed Jupiter god of the sky.

III. St-Germain l'Auxerrois

It's not famous. Another stone building
on another streetcorner in Paris,
walking distance from our small room

and an accidental discovery.
10 franc for a candle
to light before one of the many saints,

and while my own sentiment may be insignificant,
the weight of the many candles together
muffled any sound the visitors made.

It wasn't my prayer or the somber figure before me,
but the tangibility of the tranquil mass
of spirits crowding the air.

Its saints standing on the heads and backs
of monsters, myths, or laymen,
tattered skirts draping, or their own heads in their hands.

Windows rising like flaming stars,
or sunflower crops, friars stuck to the wailing spires,
saviors with hollow mouths through whose brain

one can see the blue sky. Unworldly
stained glass, and, for some reason,
a monkey playing a bagpipe.

When Monet painted it
after centuries' devastation, revolution,
fodder storage and printing works,

its yellow bled into the sky and its trees leaned away,
fondling the air, stretching
toward the edge of canvas and the chimney-pipe rooftops of Paris.

migration

she went to africa to fall in love
'cross the kenyan desert in pursuit
of chanting silhouettes in an orange sky
and the sand was so fine and smooth
(like i remember the sensation of skin)
she said

there are things worth having
but they come at a price
i want to be one of them
he told her that the trick when one flies
is never to land

(i've heard you're coming back soon
it's ten degrees and getting colder
i've learned the trick is to keep one's head
in a book and never come down
i gave up the desert for love
she said

i can breathe again
when i'm in your arms
i've migrated to the hills to escape
the bitter prairie chill)

Toward the 93-Million Mile Star

We pick the sun up where we left it yesterday,
 Earth revolving toward tomorrow.
 Two million years ago
 they date the first inkling of man, defined:
 one who works with tools,
 buried with them in mud for our posterity.
 Generations later a few wise souls traverse the Bering Strait,
 are buried with their tools, weapons, undisturbed
 for now among scoured buffalo skulls.
 The Badlands' paleoremnants, hidden in brilliant striations.
 We stop there for a picture at sunrise.

Before you knew me, you didn't know
 the joy of barreling down a gravel road to nowhere,
 to wherever it took us alongside towering cornstalks,
 windows down and dust flying.
 One spring day we ended up in Iowa
 for no better reason but the sunshine,
 summer we followed it into the west
 and waited for it to catch up and burn the prairie golden.

I save maps out of the National Geographic, drawing earth's life
 out before me. Killer whales near the Bering Strait
 devouring the few otters because seals and lions are gone.
 I eat sushi (remembering your distaste for anything exotic)
 raised on a farm in China, where once were mangroves,
 where Homo erectus first trekked from a fork in the road
 at Georgia's double-speared peninsula in Black and Caspian seas.
 Antarctica's shores are populating, and swiftly melding into the Weddell Sea.
 The country I visited as a child, rippling into the Adriatic,
 no longer exists, nor Georgia's peninsulas.

Now I call you in Iowa
 and want to tell you
 that the buildings here are layered
 with some odd history
 I can't read. Somehow
 the road led here. The Strip
 is a light show that burns all night,
 but I'm only a hundred miles or two
 from the sunset you remember.
 The one that distracted us
 driving north from Phoenix
 so we missed the turn to the Grand Canyon.

I still haven't seen it.

We keep migrating in hopes the sun will be brighter.
The city has yet to civilize me. The truck is still full of dust
and it remembers all the wrong turns down the blue highways.
I guess you still haven't seen the ocean.
It's just past the Joshuas and vineyards,
and the yawning crop of redwoods. Past the farms and raving city
and you'll smell it. It's full of history and restless.
It won't try to civilize us.
It will give us two suns every afternoon;
we can chase them until they become one
great fiery star on the horizon, half air, half water,
transversing worlds. We'll sink our feet in it, enjambed
between earth and sky.

From the Stuccoed Townhouse Balcony

I read about the ocean, and imagine my balcony an anchored island
in a dark current—the burdening lights of vessels blink past, too loud,
and I remember my tiny island floats, undetectably, above the air force base:

the outcropped twinkling of box-edged government buildings
blur under the tarnished tide, glowing like a sunken nest
of polished pearls. Our particles fly to furnish gaps

left by the absence of one another—two ambulances and a firetruck today,
at different times, rush to lade draining space, attempt to stop the ancient particles
from changing into a new shape—what is tragedy, but evolution?

In the dark valley, between mountains of fossilized sand, multitudinous neon
settles in the quiet tides of air; courtyard doors sleep regarding the pious offering of lights
below their paved altar. The famished forms of streets and lamps curl-

up in the oyster shell of watery light.

Atoms transpose my skin, this fluid vessel,

temporary,

anchored

with beasts and sleeping forms above the yowling city.

Migration

Elizabeth Bishop taught her cat
to read. Or tried. Words
like *Meow* and *Milk*. She'd water
the seed of his brain with flashcards; but would land
off-target: to her chagrin, he'd mutter *Skunk Hour*
or *petals on a wet, black bough*. So she'd map
out lessons in geography. Studying a northern map,
from its murky bowl of a brain, the cat,
"Minnow," would fish a dripping phrase like *the hour*
badly spent. She packed trunks with harmless words
and suitcases with catnip, and two orphans fled south to land
where new vocabulary floated from salty lips of water.

Where chapped peninsulas of shore kissed that water
she awoke and wondered if they'd followed the wrong map;
the thick, glossy pages of National Geographic charted land
so subtle in its lens. Sunk in twilight sand while the cat
batted fireflies, she burned postcards, watching cinders of words
float away on particles of oxygen, and hydrogen. This hour
of truth in bitter sand seemed like every demandingly timid hour
ever lived by a woman treading into age. Water
crawled up to lick her toes and curled into itself gurgling words
just audible to the coy map
of wrinkles embedded in her soles. Watching the prowling cat
and restless water, she wanted to root herself in anchored land.

But loneliness withered parched roots, and this unruly land
wasn't far south enough. She imagined each terse hour
a day, when a sip of bourbon or poem wasn't enough. The cat
orphaned, her view of the equator inverted through Atlantic water,
plotting longitudes and searching for the inherited map
to her future. She examined all the splendid new words
sliding off tongues of unwitting conspirators, hunting for words
that meant her life, that meant the thick green shelter of this land
could be her haven. But she forgot no map
is permanent; forgot that love might last a lifetime, or an hour.
And when her lover flew south across the pale and infinite water,
she missed her blessed poetry-quoting cat.

Gathering her words about her, in the frightening hour
waiting for hovering pebbles to land rings in stagnant water,
she stood with trunks, postcards, a weathered map, a nameless cat.

quietude

Wait,

the brim
of spring has
reached our edges,

toppling headlong through
the leaves she left behind;
when she arrives our eyes will hold

her vivid to the sky like stained glass
refracting.

bluebird

Across the desert a bird
so blue I thought the sky
had fallen on its wings.
The city sighs in the
distance where we've
forgotten her. He'll live
here only so long; he's
gone already leaving me
my quiet, my always.
He's risen out of himself
like morning. I thought
the sky had fallen. So
blue, and the vapor was
dust. The dust. It was
pure and red on the
ground. He had risen out
of it, pure sky. The city
settles in the distance,
leaving me my always. I
followed him as far as the
quietness would let me,
but only to capture that
second, and not know
what to do with it. I
threw it on a car hood
with bright words to stay
its transience. Lost my
momentum. Across the
desert a bird so blue, I
thought the city had risen
out of itself and forgotten
us. She quieted. And we
were left just the two of
us in dust, red, blue, the
sky, I've forgotten you
almost already. One day
we'll rise, out of
ourselves, and the quiet
world will open, become
music, and won't need
any more paper, ink, car
hoods. All will become
vapor, dust, ash. We'll
rise blue out of ourselves.

The Swimmer

Andante: 12/8 time

Plunging, fingers outstretched, pointed toes trailing, head & eyes glazed
with water, toward what

imperfect symmetry of wings extending, up & out, angel swooning the depths;
each end a bold cross mirrored —glide, contract, span— she'll reach it, and turn;

touch it, and turn;

under the surface, watching sky,
some days instead she is a bird;

all the while the rhythmic
chaos & breath, chaos

& breath

craning for air,

arching up from the surface;

ripples glint
across her like scales, morning sun shafts the water
charting the seismograph of her flight beneath.

Lento: waltz

Closes her eyes and it
guides her through lan-
guid motions she's known

for many lives—

above,

their reflection
wavering,

& an orchestra of trees
rend & bow
in hot wind—

its flesh quavering in her cupped hand.

Ritual, and a Man Counting Citrus

I arrive at your door, content substitute
for your ideal—with daisies, or a lime, plucked
from an angry man's garden along the way.

The calculus of us
an applied mastery of yearly practice
we eventually get right.

We sleep when we can, with hopes to be woken—by another
side of the same sun, or the cranky alarm that draws us
into one another's dreams—to try again while there's time.

And the man counting seeds
might scowl again as we pass, might frown
at the progression of each season.

Maybe,
he is forlorn because his perfections
need no practice.

\$8.00 Heaven

She decorated my white-trash balcony
with Christmas lights, carefully tap tap
tapping slight nails and clear-headed tacks

into the varigated stucco, while I calculated
students' grades at the kitchen table
in the front room to a faint, thumping

accompaniment from behind the bedroom.
When she finished and beamed
at me to witness her handiwork,

I sat in a room full of white fireflies,
setting our small world ablaze
with their blinking, rising above us,

sparkling off the eight-dollar chrome
of folding-chairs and populating the small
dusty windows in the french doors with light.

We reveled in our youth and poverty.
Today, sun is shining through spiderplants,
where a small, scarlet Buddha protects them

from ants, and shadows flit on the maple leaves
reaching nearly into the balcony, shielding
me from desert wind, an unusually cool May.

I read letters a man wrote
to his dying wife as he attempted
to maintain her flower garden. The spiderplants

glide on the wind to touch me. A stray nail
glints in shadows of spiders on the floor;
the lights are quiet but the sun is warm.

Whisper the Still Evening In

Soft chirp and a quick buzz;
for a moment all is still,
even the human heart.

He floats on wind, blurs with maple leaves;
comes back two, three times, then six,
tail paddling the air, wings invisible.

Announces himself each time
with a small, squeaking caw. Stops,
and watches from a branch when the man
downstairs belches and starts his truck.

His wings are still and bright; I am still.

When all is quiet, he approaches again,
suspends magically on wavering sunlight
through the leaves, shows me his cream-grey
underbelly, shoots a long tongue out at the air.

Each visit alighting the same
small branch, just long enough to note
the green-blue on his minute body, his red throat.

No one will believe this
of vast import to the nation;
leaves darken, sky turns plum
and apricot on the ridges behind them.

Inconsolable Fact:

That the immensity
beyond our green home frightens;
that the flattened nation lies

upon my table, spangled dully;
that the roar of blood and awful
cadence of a heart convinces one of madness.

Change my answer, it is malleable.

Above the small print
and the avenue's exchange, it means
this place: snow's sparkling hurts

your head; lungs burn to reconcile
doubt; time shifts
allow to pass years left unsaid;

blue shadow of the morning crawling
drifts; and always covering
the silent words a roar of footprints
stifles birds.

25 yrs

Listen.
It takes so long
to put a sentence
together. What I mean
is that... It takes
so long. How to find
the right ones, will
you follow? It's been
so quiet here so
long.

God's Eye is on the Sparrow

A dozen people in a basement
joined hands, lit candles,
drank coffee and gossiped
when off-key hymns finished.

I ate flesh, drank blood.

Was anointed in memory
of a generation with no family tree.
Like generations before
they become fossils,
boring themselves under silt and mud;
death carried from shore to shore like sand.

Anointed to save us, too.

You told me all the insomniac nights
you went to the room next door
and planned your own death
while I lay sleeping.
I woke nights wondering if you'd still be
next to me in the morning.

A different death, the same result.

In woods I prayed,
where the passerine congregation
sang on spindly legs, wind whistling
through their hollow bones,
held vigil at dusk, each alighting
his own aging limb, settling
into silent haze, peacefully awaiting.

salvage

Ghazal Snapshots of Vegas

Smooth Operators Beauty Salon: bars cross windows and door:
suspect that business comes from word-of-mouth.

Disheveled man in winter wind, thin brown jacket, heavy head,
slumps beside an overturned shopping cart.

The text of the busstop, our second thousandth year, borrowing
terse verbs from the mouth of the common man.

A young woman pedals through plunging traffic, face a blatant
canvas, Jesus in her wire basket.

Rusted wreck of truck sunken between desert slopes, hidden art,
bed a fleshy haven for dry trinkets.

The Long Now

i.

Combine:

- 1) a box that opens;
- 2) half a world of loneliness;
- 3) landscapes that represent the passage of time;
- 4) the words that mean we are complex and infinite beings in a finite space
(*I know why the caged...*).

ii.

Trapping you in a body you didn't ask for; sculpting the landscape around you into fossil,
into wrinkle; decades' growth and ruin; hundred years' cacti.

I give you limited space in which to save the world.

Belly full of landscapes I've worn, buried in glass with the notion of a bird's warble; face
the hollow shell of what a world *might* be; feet sunken into the ground to become
something new.

My hands have long become obsolete, like the face that's imagined, concave.

Shine copper, tarnish like a penny; bring your tides, bed, stellar bodies. Chronicle your
life and death by a legend.

I give you borrowed words for your joy, loneliness, comfort, infinitude, and
imprisonment.

iii.

A face like a map: charting where it's been, what it knows; a cartography of bone,
muscle, elastic skin; eye like a sunflower; but only a fraction of the whole.

A gridded basin like an earth, inconstant in meridian and texture, rolling its question
through its own grime, decay, and scribbled earnest.

A life opens like a shadow, growing to the arid limits of its own cage, throwing barbs
against its own skin; stretching toward stalwart light.

A second face, hollow, like a world mad: lonely in its isolation, saddened by its multitudes.

A torso like a capsule, holding time in its gut with these temporary elements, mending the whole together 'til its rended and replaced, outdone by its own genius.

Blue Highways

rattling across the curvature of plain that defines
dakota, rich only when studied with a quiet eye
and contemplative demeanor: factories dissipating

in the rearview, sparse ranch buildings
sinking into themselves at bloated intervals, invisible
gullies and creeks stoic,

stockpiled with mammals and reptiles (some still living,
some long dead), rainbow trout, mislaid weapons
boasting dried remnants of scalp and hide.

ya know they found that t-rex out here a few years ago.
yep. squint past glass
at the bleached grass of buffalo gap leaning away

toward a broad continent.
in some museum in chicago. rancher that owned the land
and the lady that found it, both lost custody in the suit.

watch the land ramble out on all sides,
disappear into a blur of horizon, the void of the prairie
as frightening to some as introspection.

Card Catalog Card

What's important to the nation
is no import (to me?)

WRIGHT

squished in a corner

MICRO-

openended

FILM (typewriter type) Halsey, Harlan Page, 1839?-1898.

3 x 5 its small creamy decadence distracts me from a pacing lecture on John Ashbery, the speaker's coat is black and his face boyish

(hand scripted in pen, a careful, feminine hand)

2H-4 (type) Annie Wallace; or, The exile of Penang.

my own boyish face has only become more pointed & stretched since the days I thumbed through these on wooden stools, shuffling in their long wooden drawers w/ muddled brass fixtures, the light was always nicest in the afternoon, gray, before the fluorescents clicked on

A tale. By Harlan P. Halsey. New York,

the tale doesn't end there, it's only the beginning, it's yet to reach its penultimate (because even it isn't final) lower cover and may never—the child spent entire afternoons devouring, and maybe Penang itself would eventually emerge

Miller & Holman, 1857.

my version of America is a quiet one, a history that repeats itself, or never changes, not the public private sector but the days like birds and their trees perching in rich clay or in a pale sky

304 p. (Wright American fiction, v. II,

but the lecture always ends too soon & there's so much to say—our fictions remind us we're not lone, hatching them evenings after the brutal news on the radio—the brown air of people distracts me and I lose my words

1851-1875, no. 1074, Research Publications

those days alone in the sky, the child an unassuming exile in the world's margins with rough ladders of pine for lookouts on a canyon packed w/ green spires under which you cannot see the floor of needles, brown two-pronged & brittle—(and the sky reached Penang, which you cannot see either w/ its tide clear as air)—(how old was I?)

Microfilm, Reel H-4)

a girl in the lecture passes me her poem about blue women (maybe they too are lost in the sky?)—this tenure has almost ended and what have I learned?—it's been revised; everything is revised, continually. ours is the oldest language, its music constantly revised & rare if ever mastered

I. Title.

I may be blue yet

Songs for the Folk Radio

The folk know what they want

That edge between the night when darkness means the end of work. The smell of rain hanging on air, the promise of a break and a harvest. Gone away and found on the mountainside; change who went across and the sea stood still. Silently close their lives grow to a nail bent in a post, or something not theirs. Mine may not be the kingdom of God, but what is mine grows in the tended earth, good for folk to sink into and watch it as rays trickle into their toil, of generations.

The hurt eyes. And of my thinking into the tended earth. Global anything. More. Community can't respond with care, behind the ears. The clean hurt eyes.

Wanna know the night. Lights changing, stations blindness. Saturday moving in. Bloodstream, here you been all along. Come crying loud your doubt. For crying out loud, let it feel. Now go. Babylon's ears, the red blue. Back home, if in want never doubt your own head. Go. But repeats. And it's through.

City shuts buffalo out. The old me: sing, listen, stare. When windfall breaks and beauty joked, law bored me. And sing me lullaby; the rock fall; clip and getting colonized. Stay.

Smell taste brilliant. Step. Whatever want to gonna. What I see for let be, through shame, time wants everything. Nothing sacred. We as, no. No, as stepping shades and; yeah.

In real clean on Saturday, cold city confesses angel. Way life is when sunsets in western working. Ride; wrangle; die. I. I stars the sky.

Some woman coming. She, your three. How remain, this the name we sounds same, is fickle. Her, the *will you* living where only the *I'm tired* will slide over her. So shamed.

Never off ground. Flown. Those who have flight.

Kids know. Can guess. Hard is love, fall round the block. Christmas and I love, walked me. Hide. Chevy driving, get even with minds.

Late radio across in night. Nest blankets rest; drumbeat the raining the all way to Texas, through rain and Arkansas first.

Need hammer but to thread the needle seen miles before a storm. Bright sail, as artist say, to far shore and torn blue.

Drinkin it's mad. Got me ambition, a condition. Before the *come'ere* find flying and look. Life night, and anything makes it home; everybody.

In daylight what we can, hearts raw, clean, away. Water like fearless jumped in with feet uncontrolled. So we're on a hill, ancient, standing strong. Fast it cannot matter; hard thrown clear away of it here.

She away; autumn, competition shiny. The *how* dancing her, with cool *I know*.

That edge between the night and tended earth. The promise of rain and generations.

Don't Forget Where You Came From

your father told you. Amber grass blurs
on either side of a rust-on-white Toyota.
A mass mammoth grave is excavated nearby.

The radio is broken, hawks patrol the stream
hiding to the south for small, thirsty rodents.
It's a windy November, happy that the sun

and heater are both still on duty. Remember
how the two of you struggled with the aluminum
sheets that would reinforce the roof,

you on a wobbly ladder and him on the roof itself.
How the roof actually wanted to take off in the wind
like a section of airplane wing. How you held

the roof and the aluminum to it more for fear
of flying away yourself than to keep the thing
on there until he could nail it down.

She Doesn't Read Poetry Because of Brooks & Warren

Because they didn't teach her that it's the small soft
fingers of a child struggling to twist together
a shoelace that makes a poem. Or that
reading the skyline of one's birth place

recalls the sound of wind in wheatfields
and the coolness of redbrown clay in a palm
scooped from the banks of the river. Later, sun
will bake whatever trifle you've sculpted to boast

'til the Missouri reclaims it. You'll teach
your dog to swim there, in a cove beside the grunting
current; ford between the shoals in drought; college girls
will drink cheap jugs of wine there above the harvest

and sing hymns they won't remember a few
years later. They won't know each other anymore,
but will retain the silhouette of the "we" they were
that night dipping themselves in the boundary

between two states. They won't think about what came
before them: homesteaders armed with two oxen,
a shotgun, the family trunk richly stained between
its creaking hinges; their fields rended by rolling

thunderheads of locust; fathers lost 'til springtime
trying to fetch the minister or save the herd
from blizzard, appearing again peacefully leaned
against a soggy haystack after the thaw, eyes fixed

on the flat horizon; the maddening silence of the first
year on prairie void of trees, birds, or landmark
to occupy the eyes. They won't think of what
is to come, in this place they'll all leave, morphed

by a century's toil in dirt: how the trees that stretched,
despite impinging winter, to shield their houses
would be lapped up by bulldozers, roots splayed
across the grass still gripping tendrils of soil: houses

—that replaced homes erected of earth, sod bricks
and sapling thatches—windows long boarded
up against looters, behind chain-link, beyond
the chipped curb of a busy intersection, gutted

and disassembled to expand the airport. They'll find
the voice in their throat are not their own, but belong
to their mothers, grandmothers, and the night
they spent singing an offering to the river itself.

She doesn't read poetry. Because to live
a life is not always to revel in its patterns,
the immigrant's dream breathtaking
and devastating. The child tying his shoe

on the opposite sidewalk is mesmerized by the glint
of bright machinery folding and lurching
in hot summer, and he has my father's face.
I want to tell her this.

15 minutes

You can count on him being there every morning. A cap tipped in his hand, eyes magnified by thick too-big glasses, gray hair & stubble slightly wild. If he can see you through the glasses he won't look. Today someone has made him a very neatly printed placard gridded out on cardboard:

HOMELESS a DONATION WILL HELP

and on his head's a stocking cap. The cassette deck scrolls out No Woman, No Cry and the guitar solo is infecting, climbing resonant & clear through a lexicon of mastery, years of practice to reach two flawless minutes. Up the street, rows of houses are gutted to make elbow room for the airport. At night, passersby witness the warm eerie glow of an incinerator. On a rare clear day the mountains are so beautiful you're tempted to linger here & watch shadows move across them endlessly.

15 minutes

We carry things sometime for years before we put them on paper. But first, the houses are gone except a few standing chimneys, one painted coral, next to the red crane. Mesmerized by the red against bad paint peeling on the truck hood, & the desert's pale dust nestled around it; and all the while I thought of how we missed Giverny because of my friend's Parisian love affairs & the moon's eclipse last night for our choice of hemispheres. The things I carry will emerge when I forget, and I'll skirt the nurse's question, not telling her that the feathers & turquoise are decorative, but the bear claw carries *me* somehow as well—we're partners. Just as in English word & world are accidental twins.

poetry, an exercise against loss

to comfort in the arms of water
to lie in the hammock
 of another's skin
to trap my mother's face
 in the sunlight of streetfront windows
to wear-out one's boots a season too early
to bundle trees and rivers in a knapsack
 and claim its weight one's baggage
to trace contours of flesh
 as academic
to learn to lie and mistrust truth
to kiss without being radical
to diffuse into letters
 and fire
 thread and glass
 bone
 rock
 steel.

rust

like iron,
a body rusts
in places neglected
stains our hands
wanting to sand
back to shine

Repair

The next morning I mended the coffee table, on my knees
fixing the broken leg with the drill my father gave me for Christmas,
a trip to the hardware store to replace broken panels of glass—I couldn't afford them
smoked and beveled like before—the *stop I'm scared* and *I'll show you scared* still fresh.

The letter I should have written years ago;

Dear S—

I'm sorry I was so tired for so long.

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