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Building the Ark

Jessica Kruse

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BUILDING THE ARK

by

Jessica Kruse

Bachelor of Arts
University of Wisconsin, Madison
2002

Master of Fine Arts
University of Nevada, Las Vegas
2007

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the

**Master of Fine Arts Degree in Creative Writing
Department of English
College of Liberal Arts**

**Graduate College
University of Nevada, Las Vegas
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ABSTRACT

Building the Ark

by

Jessica Kruse

Dr. Alik Barnstone, Examination Committee Chair
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Building the Ark is a reference to the Biblical story of Noah's and the Ark. I became fascinated with this story a few years ago after realizing that, like many females mentioned in the Bible, the wife of Noah has no name and is simply a peripheral figure. This title poem, which attempts to uncover the story of a modern-day nameless wife of Noah, soon became central to the focus of the entire manuscript. Like the title poem, the manuscript as a whole focuses on physical and emotional displacement, with an emphasis on the search for a geographical and psychological space in which one feels at home. By questioning sexuality, religion, loss and love, the poems offer a compromise between the duties and desires the poems' speakers struggle with. While the manuscript does not provide any concrete answers, it does suggest that there is humor within sorrow and loss, and that there is hope rather than despair in unanswered questions.

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The late Polish writer Stanislaw Lem once wrote, “Faith is, at one and the same time, absolutely necessary and altogether impossible.” With this in mind, I would like to express my gratitude to the scholars and poets whose faith in the creative process provided immense help during the writing and reworking of this manuscript. I would like to thank my committee, particularly Aiki Barnstone, for her guidance and support which helped shape this thesis. I would also like to express gratitude to friend and fellow poet, Meredith Stewart, whose time, talent and creativity helped move many of these pieces from raw drafts into finished poems. Finally, thanks to my dear husband Paul—for having faith in me, and for teaching me, somewhat unexpectedly, to have a little faith.

I. LIMBO

Limbo

The year during my childhood when we had a blizzard
in May: it hadn't snowed
for almost two months, then suddenly a storm

the same day as my grandfather's funeral.
My cousin and I, too young to know
we were expected to mourn death,

chose instead to grieve for the snow day
we missed out on,
already taken from school for the wake.

All during the church service
we glanced toward the windows, stained
glass taunting us with its colored frost.

I imagined what we were missing,
strained to hear the happy shrieks signaling
the start of a snowball fight, the laughter

sneaking in during the silences between
the liturgy and hymns.
There was no burial that day,

the frozen ground too stubborn to give of itself,
too selfish; killing everything
already risen from the earth that spring.

So we had the service, and the meal that followed,
and then my cousin and I, finally free,
spent the rest of the afternoon building

forts and burying each other
in the snow banks, our tiny bodies
kept warm within our tombs,

voices growing muffled as the snow
piled on. A test of wills
to see how long each of us could withstand

the removal, the deafening silence,
the feeling of floating somewhere in between:
not below the ground, but not quite above it either.

Religion

I.

In those days of my childhood I believed
my parents, pastors, teachers who said to me
that I had no say in my beliefs;

who taught me that right and wrong were already decided,
and conveniently recorded in a book of laws.
In case I had any questions, the answers were easy to find.

Who told me that I was saved for believing
one specific idea, or because of the water and the words
poured over my head the day I was born.

Who tried to tell me that I was saved for believing,
but that you might not be, even if you think
you are, even if you believe your god saves
in exactly the same way as mine.

II.

In those days I was allowed to have friends
who did not share my beliefs, but only because
there was always that slight chance of conversion,

that I could bring them back to truth and light,
to life with a Saul-to-Paul-on-the-road-to-Damascus moment
on a bus ride home from Quinney Elementary.

And so I was allowed coffee dates with my Pakistani-
Muslim friend, allowed to spend time with the effeminate
skirt-and-eyeliner wearing boys in my theatre classes,

all the while going to church every Sunday, singing
in the choir, and passing my religious classes
because I didn't care enough to challenge what I was taught.

III.

Now, years later, I am married
to a Jewish-born, Catholic-raised Atheist;

and although I can laugh

when I tell him he is his own walking religious joke,
and I can tell him what it is I no longer believe in,
I still cannot explain what I do accept as the truth,

or what I think may be waiting for us
on the other side of this existence
in that sweet, unknown abyss of death.

I still cringe, out of habit, when he mutters
Jesus Christ under his breath,
or when he looks me in the eye and tells me there is no god.

During the Eight Weeks Before I Started My New Job

I thought I'd write more those days, but didn't.
I thought about doing a lot of things,
but the timing wasn't right—I found myself too busy
drinking coffee, reading books on philosophy,

watching more television than I cared to admit,
drinking too much and sleeping it off with ten hours every night.
I accepted dates with men I wasn't attracted to
and thought about all the sex I could be having,

but went home alone instead and masturbated,
holding a beer in my other hand,
careful to keep it all inside the bottle
while I came.

But the poetry didn't come,
and after awhile I didn't try very hard.
I made excuses so I wouldn't feel so guilty.
There was no privacy in the house. No computer.

Even the toilet paper was communal.
There were too many people around. The constant noise.
All those comings and goings. I felt silly,
even with my own noise, embarrassed

if someone found me there—the dissecting,
the crude reassembling of the parts.
Embarrassed with the thesaurus lying open in my lap;
the talking to myself, my lips pursed on the edge of a pen,

a mug, a word. My eyes anxiously reading
the poetry out loud to get the sound.
The fervent glazed-over look.
The frustration. The intimacy.

You Ask About the Procedure

Afterward back at home
when you ask if it was painful
I tell you yes, only not
according to your definition.

The door half-
closed between us,
these brief moments in limbo
just slivers of memory
nestled inside.

A womb of information
birthed and abandoned:

Plots of books. Entire days
slept through out of exhaustion or apathy.
Names of plants. State capitols. Former lovers. Words
spoken out of tenderness or anger. Mistakes I have made.

After the Bodies Have Been Taken Away

I. With

The feeling of your hands exploring
every fissure of my body
keeping me alive all night with their touch.

II. Without

Rain pools around our bared legs and torsos
covers our hair; our bodies
umbrella the cement so that when we finally stand up
the places we sat look like chalk outlines at a crime scene investigation
after the bodies have been taken away—
nothing remains except the suggestion of a presence.

There are Three of Us Now

I don't long for your body—
not even when you are pressed up
against me in the half-glow of dawn.

I don't even touch you, afraid
you will be able to tell where
my hands have been by how differently

I place them on your skin. I have learned
to be quiet so I don't cry out, uninhibited,
the way he begs me to—I don't know

whose name might be screamed,
for there are three of us now
in this bed you and I share.

You don't speak it but you notice
the differences—the newly found strength,
the growl deep in my throat, the sudden

intense dissatisfaction. You tell me
that I have become a stranger, a savage,
a beast, as I push you away,

as I find fault with your everything,
clawing at your back, tearing into your flesh
like it is meat thrown to a wild dog.

Autumn

Because you are a drama queen,
you throw yourself down

center-stage even before summer's
quiet exit. Biting the air

each morning and evening, you scream
Here I am! and *Look at me!*

Flamboyant. Defiant.

You are dressed for the occasion
in bright reds and oranges, your ego

grows larger daily, swept up
in the praise from the audience.

They fawn on you, saying
how pretty, autumn. How heavenly

your earthy musk. How cool you are.
How composed. But for you,

autumn, the flattery is never enough
to make you stay, and after a few brief weeks

of vivid color, you creep
back into a corner, stage-left,

to sulk and cry, growing
more gray and dim every day

until early one morning you disappear
completely in a stormy, frosty huff.

V&A Waterfront

Cape Town

I.

All those wasted first days I lingered
too long in cafes. I wandered homesick
through the stores at the waterfront—
tacky gift shops selling the tourist
idea of an entire continent.
Wooden masks made in China,
textiles in bold patterns and colors
of tribes too far north to even be Southern
Africa, postcards of the “Big Five”
or of children living in Third World poverty—
a Cape Town they would never experience,
save for a good photo op.

II.

This is Cape Town for the un-
vaccinated, a sterile
experience! No need to worry
about the diseases
running rampant
through an entire nation.
No worries about the crime
rate, except for the occasional
tourist mugging. “Vacation”
is their excuse for anti-
bacterial excitement.
And what was mine—
Boredom? Loneliness?

III.

All those first lonely days I wandered
through this commercial maze
shopping desperately
for an American accent—
well worth the purchase
of an occasional Irish Coffee
to bring me one-half the distance

closer to home,
even for merely an hour or two.
And yet, it was hard to mask my loathing
of the place, of the tourists,
the shopping malls, the safety.
Harder still, to mask the sense of calming familiarity
that came with the experience every time.

And Then She Knew She was Ready to Move On

Because for years afterward she tries to write about the rape and can't get past the memory of his body on hers (the tremendous weight,

the bruise on her hip that remained for fifteen days, a reminder each time she dressed that undesired hands were familiar with her body)

she decides instead to write about the time that came after—the long months during which she separated herself from her own body; when she tried to carry her sex

held out in front of her like a torch; when she embraced the shame because she couldn't forget. The long months when she invited into her bed

man after man, attempted to use her body to discard her memories, all the while knowing it wasn't really working,

spending night after night afraid of the shadows, of walking into her apartment alone, of strangers approaching her on the street.

Until one night, when the nakedness finally felt safe for the first time, she gave in, and told the man next to her what had happened.

The man was silent for a long while. Nearly too long. And when he finally spoke, he could barely speak, and in a choked voice said

I want to find him and kill that son of a bitch. But she shook her head, kissed his cheek, saying *No. You don't want that. Just go to sleep.*

Pity Party

The party ended hours ago but you can't get yourself to leave the inviting warmth of the living room. It's only you and Pity (that uninvited guest) who linger, sitting on the floor wrapped up in streamers fallen from the ceiling. You mention that you wish the others had stayed longer. Pity just laughs as he reclines back on a pillow, says—

*It doesn't matter if they are here or not.
Yes, they surround you with gifts,
they bake a cake with your name
on it, fill balloons and sing to you,
but they don't really love you anyway, do they?*

Standing up, he stuffs a bit of cheese into his mouth and wipes his hand down the front of the black dress you wear on nights when you feel needy. He leaves a pasty yellow trail on the fabric (Pity loves making you feel like a slob) and continues criticizing you, enjoying the defeated expression on your face.

*Such a lonely girl. No doubt they are talking
about you now. They're most likely whispering
behind your back, complaining how boring
you are and your little parties too.
They are all agreeing on how happy they are
to finally be somewhere else, which is, no doubt,
much more fun than being with pathetic you.*

Pity is gaining momentum now. He sprays tiny bits of cracker as he pats your arm.

*Even your husband has left you,
for his mistress work.*

(Pity loves to remind you of this.)

*Even he prefers the bliss of her arms,
while you fall asleep in your bed alone.*

You are tempted to force Pity to leave, but can't quite get yourself to say the words. Pity is not someone to argue with, prone to despair and anger. Instead, you watch as he pours himself another glass of wine, hoping soon he will tire and leave on his own terms, because you know what a bad drunk he is.

In truth, the familiarity of his words is comforting, in the way they warm you almost to the point of burning, like sitting too close to a hot fire after coming in from the cold.

Pity turns on the radio. He tunes it intentionally to the sad song station. He turns up the volume, saying

I love this song

in a choked up voice, as he closes his eyes, singing along and swaying to the tempo. You know that he's dedicating every word to you: every verse about heartbreak, each mournful melody, all those choruses about loneliness. A medley of sorrows labeled with your name, and you love every agonizing minute.

Weather: A Letter to Las Vegas in the Summer

July again. Nothing
very different
from last year's July,
nor the one
before that. After
three years in Las Vegas
I've discovered
there are only so many
words to describe
a Mojave summer
and the meteorologists
appear to have exhausted
all of them: dry heat,
hot one, scorcher,
they proclaim
excitedly, as though
the unchanging
weather was news
of a murder, something
worthy of interrupting
previously scheduled
programming. They report
the daily highs
and lows vindictively,
as though handing
down a death
sentence to a serial
killer, their hands
moving quickly
across their canvas.

Day after fiery day
I curse my car,
the steering wheel
too hot to touch
for the first few minutes
of each drive.
In class my students
tell me facts
about the city's heat,
proud, I suppose
of one natural
occurrence in a city

that thrives
on replicates.
They tell me
the number of showers
an average Las Vegas takes
on a summer day,
and how many
dependable years
of water we currently
have left
flowing through a pipeline
from a rapidly-
dehydrating
Colorado River.

Las Vegas, where are
these promised
meadows? Point me
in the direction
of your springs,
a source of life
in the dead
heat of summer.
Imagine a time with
no water crisis:
the dry cracked
marble of fountains
shiny and wet instead,
singing "raindrops
keep fallin' on my head",
residents watering
their lawns when needed,
without the help
of a schedule.

Show me a sun
that won't burn my skin
in thirty minutes
(hot, but not too hot).
Or, at the very least,
give me a cool
breeze at night,
something
to write home about.
A chance
cloudy day

or a fluke
of a thunderstorm
threatening
rain in the distance,
bringing relief,
at least
for a moment.

Pretty Good Day

She sleeps late, wakes
when he brings coffee
and sweet rolls to bed.
In the afternoon a picnic
with friends: one of them
(not the man she lives with)
she loves more than she should.
Only the two of them know this.
It is nearly dark
when she arrives home.
For two hours until
she goes to bed she stumbles
from room to room
without turning on any lights.
A pretty good day he says
when he returns to the house
and joins her, undressing for bed.
She is glad for the darkness:
in the shadows he can't see
whether or not she agrees.

The Problem with Poets

That was not the last time I committed suicide.

Neal Cassady

When the poet talks about his suicides, not once does he think about the possibility that she'll stay up all night waiting; that after she turns the light out, dates other men, gets married, has children, she's secretly hoping he'll come back. No, not once when the poet writes about his suicides does he think about the aftermath for anyone other than himself, nor does he think about anything at all except whether or not the lines sound dead on the page, wondering if he should keep these words alive.

Divorce

It wasn't even milk, merely water
fallen from a glass carelessly set down
on the edge of the desk, too close
to the power strip.

I watched you jump
to grab a towel, mopping up
as much of the mess as you could,
watched the liquid darken the carpet.

And all the while I simply sat there,
not doing anything, not apologizing,
not crying over the spill; but instead
found myself fascinated with the water,

watching it sink into the rug,
marveled at how we couldn't stop it.
How it moved dangerously close
to the power outlet, while I remained still:
distant and uncertain; secretly hoping for a spark.

**In Answer to a Friend's Question:
What Do You Miss Most About Autumn in Wisconsin?**

What I miss most is its progression,
how it turns victory into defeat,
celebration into decay. A reminder
that death never stops touching us.
Here in Las Vegas this October I find myself
wondering whether we are moving,
and in what direction. Maybe you were right
when you said bodies in motion
can move so far apart from each other
they no longer recognize their closeness;
and that bodies at rest can stagnate.
And maybe you were right about intimidation
being merely fear of the unknown,
and if so, I am afraid of sunburn in November;
blizzards made of sand; of cacti, standing tall
outside suburban homes, blinking with colored lights;
of summer getting lost in fall, turning itself
into winter while I am still green.

Love with Another Poet

We made love like an airplane, a porch swing,
a topographical map, an earthworm. Like a really good book

when we spoke we wanted every word to have the meaning
of an entire page. So we read each other slowly,

took too long, became more critical of the subtext than we should have.
Love became a school of fish, a cat's meow, suddenly

a tomb. Like thieves or gluttons, like wives of ancient pharaohs,
we buried ourselves alive with the dead, tried to smuggle into our next worlds

things that should have stayed behind. Your name came to mean
more than the letters it contained, more than a former lover.

Became my first trip to Italy, the memory of a cold
wet day in the Mojave Desert, a sandstorm, a tumbleweed, a handwritten letter

from a close friend. Even when we saw the end coming we didn't
see the end, but the perfect poem we read yesterday.

Lost

The camera:

Left on the shopping center bench in Georgetown
when I was twelve, and turned in by a young girl
who didn't want another camera stolen,
as hers was the week before.

"You're lucky," the security guard tells me
after I describe the red case and its contents
to prove I'm one of the trustworthy.

"These things are never returned. Never."

Library books:

Found months later under a sofa, behind a bookshelf.

Movie store videos:

Weeks of racked up late fees.

A jacket:

Corduroy, recently purchased, forgotten
on the back of a library chair
after a long night of studying,
mysteriously appearing on my office door two weeks later,
no note, never a mention from anyone.

My virginity:

Not soon enough to suit some of the earlier boyfriends.

The wedding ring:

Pried off one thunderous night.
The marriage recovered, but the wedding ring
stayed hidden in some unknown crevice behind the bed.

My patience:

With students, family, sometimes my husband, usually my poems.

A handful of people I believed to be friends:

Some of the time this was my fault,
some were not mine to lose.

A couple people's treasures.

Sometimes, their trust.

My heart:

Frequently.

My heart:

Yes. My heart. I keep coming back to this. The losing and the finding.
The giving and forgetting, and the giving again. And the forgetting.
And the giving. And the giving. Oh, the giving.

II. THE CAPE OF GOOD HOPE

Found

Imagine:

the papers signed and filed in the attorney's office
no more waking up with that emotional phantom-limb ache
or going to bed lonely
or crying during the middle of the day, every day
a new life somewhere other than where you are right now
sex with no strings attached and no guilt
new furniture that does not remind you of a missing half
the ring traded in for a fabulous vacation
where you lie on a beach contented and relaxed
with no indentation remaining on your finger
to remind you of what you have lost

A Möbius Strip

is a one-sided surface constructed from a rectangle
by holding one end fixed, rotating the opposite
end 180 degrees, and joining it back to the first.

August Möbius was afraid of one-sidedness,
the eternity, the unknown. In his mind
it twisted around and around; first one way,
then the other, a single idea continuously tormenting him.

A strip giving twice the power, twice the usage, twice the longevity.
That the strip itself was not his idea is documented

by more than one source, but the name lies still with Möbius,
the respect for inventing invention all over again. Today
giant Möbius strips are used as continuous-loop
recording tapes and conveyer belts,
each "side" receiving the same amount of wear.

In factories and warehouses

all over the world, the strips lie low, singing along
with the slow, sultry hum of machinery,
a song that never hesitates, that goes nowhere new.

After Taking the Myers-Briggs Personality Test and Being Classified as an (E)xtroverted i(N)tuitive (F)eeling (P)erceiver

For ENFPs nothing occurs which does not have deep ethical significance. Which means if we all had been born with red capes and red underwear we too would feel the need to save the world from its madness.

ENFPs view life as an exciting television drama, pregnant with possibilities for the clever rescuing of distressed damsels and quick phone booth stripteases. Also known as Champion Idealists, we are inclined to dive

into every act which deals with the advancement of good and the retreat of our personal Lex Luthers. We must experience firsthand all significant events affecting our lives,

although we can never fully shake the feeling that a part of ourselves is split off, as though each of us is Superman watching a movie about Superman, uninvolved in the experience.

Striving for a spontaneous authenticity makes us tireless in conversing with others. Like fountains that bubble and splash, we are eager to get all the words out. The only real danger we face is ourselves; of being caught up in the excitement and drawing too close to the kryptonite in the process.

Music from Another Room

When the main character is asked to explain what true love is, he pauses for a moment before answering, still holding the fork in his left hand. He tells the other dinner guests that true love is hearing your favorite song playing in another room in your own house—something so familiar that even when the song is interrupted (by a passing car, a train, other voices) when you can hear it again you are still in the right place with its melody. The scene ends and everyone at the table is quiet. Probably they realize, as I do, that they have never truly been in love; that it was never their favorite song playing; that the music they heard was music from another room in some other house on another block in a suburb outside of some other Major US City.

Request

-for PJ

Don't ever stop watching me while I undress.
It makes the act much more enjoyable.
When we are sixty I want you
to have that same expression on your face.
I still want you to say *mmm, yeah babe,*
this is my favorite part. And I will take off
my dress for you over and over again.

Gezellig

Loosely translated into English as “cozy,”
it means much more than that in its original Dutch.
“Comfortable” and “safe” are elements.
“Intimate” comes close, but even then
something is missing.

If you ever have a chance to use the word,
say it with confidence. When you first speak
its syllables out loud try not to forget
the guttural g sound—like swallowing an egg whole,
when it squeezes past your tongue
and slides down into your stomach.

Let the middle of the word dance around
on your tongue, make it sparkle
like good champagne. Savor the z,
the double l. Allow yourself
the chance encounter with recklessness.

Get giddy and drunk on the word.
Only in that moment will you get near
the truth. Yet even then
a part of it is missing, forgotten
at the country’s border.

But maybe the rest of us don’t need
the whole of it like they do. After all,
the Dutch have twenty-seven words for “rain”.
No wonder, then, they have one
that is nearly untranslatable, which can be used when leaving it behind.

One that suggests going into the house from a drizzly
dusk, and shaking off a winter umbrella;
a word for changing out of damp clothes,
for the hot shower or mug of tea to chase away
those bone-chills. A word for the dinner that follows,
for the wine and the laughter of an evening with good friends.

And much later, a word for crawling quietly into bed
next to the soft warm body of a lover, already asleep,
whom you know with complete certainty loves you back.

Addictions

She's giving up smoking for the second
or twenty-second time. Cold turkey
she says loudly to anyone asking
her to join in a cigarette break.
Cold turkey she says nervously,
stepping back inside her office
where she twiddles her fingers
anxiously, daydreams about turkeys
with cranberry sauce and smoker's coughs,
waving cigarettes and squawking *gobble gobble*
in deep throaty smoker voices.
She's aware of the nervous agitation,
of her tight hold on the pen,
is tempted to draw its end up to her lips,
breathes in the scent of blue ink,
imagining the heady rush of nicotine
scrawling its way down into her lungs.

She's giving up smoking—four days
now, and they say if you can get through
the first three you can beat any addiction,
is what she reminds her friends at the bar
that night, though she doesn't tell them
she has no clue who *they* is, and to be honest,
doesn't think this fourth day is going much better
than the first three. To console herself she eyes
her friends' packs, sitting out on the table,
is tempted by the Christmas golds and greens
of the packages, breathes in the sweetness
second-hand, its smoky redolence dripping
sticky through her branched veins
like the syrup she tapped from maple trees
each spring as a child in Door County.

She's giving up smoking, but cheats
after she falls asleep. Each night
in her dreams the first thing she does
is light up. She chain smokes through
each scene—doesn't matter what
she's doing in them: caring for her children,
fucking or making love to faceless men
and women. Even in her nightmares
she's smoking: it's a high school exam

she didn't study for, and there she sits
holding a cigarette, trying to recall
answers to questions from a biology class
she didn't even go to—can't find a pen
to save her life. In the end
it's only the cigarette that doesn't fail her.

Even in the dreams about running the marathon,
it's not a number but the image
of a Camel or the Marlboro Man
that's pinned to the back of her shirt
like a name and address in the jacket
collar of a small child. This dream is always the same:
she lights up just as the gun goes off,
waves to her family, cheering her on
in the crowd, starts running a nice steady pace,
the smoke from her cigarette trailing her
like another runner, chugging and puffing
behind her like a train engine,
sneaking up to overtake her on her left-hand side.

My First Week Teaching a Composition Class

CREEK the letters declare boldly in white capital letters
next to the wavy line that cuts down the middle

of the chalkboard. below that and slightly to the left
lies a square, triangle-capped, the word HOUSE

with its attached CHIMNEY rising up to the clouds
like a banner of smoke. I am attempting to discuss description

in my English 101 class today, the differences between
objective and subjective writing. My students warily

eye up the chalk monstrosity, drawn hastily on the board
during their pop quiz. One week of meeting together

and already I think they don't know what to think of me,
don't understand the foreign place

where I was raised, halfway across the country
from this desert. So I tell them about the farm

my grandparents owned where I spent summers with my cousins,
none of us going home until our parents called across the FIELDS.

*(My grandparents' FARMHOUSE is white with green shutters is objective;
and the HOUSE my father was raised in, my first love as a child,*

was the most beautiful house in the world is subjective.)

But their blankness tells me they don't appreciate my efforts,

or means they don't want to. Trying a new approach
I tell them how we rode around the BARN on bikes,

tormenting the cows at dusk as they ambled back into place
in their headlocks, their udders full and shuddering with milk.

I tell them about the HOUSE, and the ATTIC,
the old photographs of people we had never seen

or heard of, letters written in German,
in Dutch and in French. Unexpected toys

and games my father and uncle played with
long before they were my father and my uncle.

I tell them about the WHEAT, on the very edge of the map,
and how my brothers one time, going back to the white HOUSE

from this ripe FIELD, tricked me into touching the electric cow fence,
the shock being how I imagined getting struck by lightening

might feel—simultaneously terrifying and magnificent;
and what I was never able to figure out while I was gripping

that wire, was whether I physically couldn't move my body
or, for a brief moment, I didn't want to.

First Communion

Knelt down before him I take it in my mouth,
take and drink as though I know what I am doing.

I try to remember how they instructed me,
not wanting it to be wrong, but my lips pucker

over the unexpected pressed against the roof of my mouth,
my tongue twisted around, my lips *given for you*.

Look into his eyes, show him you worship him
I was told in hushed whispers by the bad Lutheran girls

already in need of forgiveness. But I can't, embarrassed
even though he wants this. Even though *this is my body*

I want this. Forgive me my conscience.
I feel his body stiffen. *Given for you*.

Feel the reassurance, his hands on my head,
blessing me, drawing me closer as he comes closer.

As I taste his bread and his wine.
As I hear him moan *oh Christ*.

As his cup overflows.

How I Learned to Fear What I Did Not Know I Should Fear

It attacked from behind, from the side
of the road where the shrubs grew thick
and woven with the trees, a wooden

whizzing screech like the ten-cent firecrackers
my brothers set off in our backyard
every 4th of July. It came out of nowhere,

clawed me in the back of the scalp and withdrew.
Once my flailing arms dropped back to my sides
it hit me again: winged jab to my face, sharp

beak in my scalp. All the while I was running,
I screamed, and looking behind, saw the beast
hurtling toward me, screaming back.

It latched onto my cheek, hook to flesh,
dislodging my glasses from the bridge of my nose,
feathers in my eye, black on red on black.

Days later I read in the newspaper
about a man riding his bicycle
through the arboretum. Steering

into the path of an oncoming car he broke
his arm, a leg, two ribs. At first
doctors suspected drugs or alcohol,

but found no traces in his blood.
When the man regained consciousness, the media
interviewed him from his home where he was recovering.

He spoke of a red-winged blackbird, protecting her young,
that flew out of the bushes to attack, rushing directly
into his face, and how just as suddenly she retreated.

The Sound of Their Bodies

My mother laughs as she tells me about that first trip to the Smokies. The bears outside the cabin window, the mice that raced all night on the open rafters above their heads. She didn't sleep the entire weekend, fearing the mice would fall down on the bed. *But the sunrise that first morning, you should have seen it! How the color rose through the mist, dividing the mountains and bringing them together at the same time.* She remembers this when I (sixteen and stars in my eyes) ask about romance: That he stayed awake with her, whispering into her hair, the sound of their bodies entwined with the melody of the forest, enveloping the darkness in a symphony, worshiping all things nocturnal.

The Cape of Good Hope

Today I am standing where the restless waters
of the Atlantic and the Indian merge.
The place where Portuguese and Dutch merchants
passed by on their routes to and from the East Indies.

Where, with hope, they secured letters under rocks,
safely out of the tide's reach;
notes to be taken back home to loved ones
by the next ship passing through.

Where the sighting of Table Mountain
by a restless sailor was a beacon,
and the rounding of the Cape a marker
of how far they had come on their journey.

I wanted to travel like an explorer—
wanted this Cape to be good to me too;
needed it to mean that I was more than halfway
to my meeting with hope and fortune.

I came looking for adventures,
left messages for fellow travelers
smuggled nuggets of history into my pockets
hoping one of them might compass me.

Tomorrow I will fly home
to tell my love the distance between us
is insurmountable, and that the division
of an ocean made me certain.

My life is at a crossroads.
I am standing helplessly
at the meeting point of two great currents,
and find myself annoyed by the symbolism.

The early merchants exploring this territory
wore hope like a cape,
every minute an unknown, an adventure;
but my hope lies in unanswered questions.

My cape is failure that sends me
crashing into the waves. Like Icarus
I flew with the intention of escape,
but my flight did not take me where I expected.

Tomorrow I will fly home from the Cape
I will tuck my failed marriage into an envelope
like a letter and return to this very spot
to place it under a rock and send it away.

Perhaps when I come back I will discover
what it is that draws me to this point,
even after I have sunk down deep
into its unforgiving waters.

Perhaps the beauty is in the commitment
to the journey; and hope is found
in the search for something good,
in this desire for flight, even on melted wings.

Photo Taken While Facing a Mirror in the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles

Like the part in the magician's performance where he cuts through the box and the woman inside can still move her arms and feet, in this photo my legs appear to be detached from the rest of my body, yet I am still able to stand upright. In the mirror the tourists seem to be an audience at intermission: the cameras raised predictably like champagne glasses, and we have become drunk on too many shots of flashbulb; the maps of the gardens lie crumpled in our hands like cocktail napkins; we make small talk and sneak in smiles and jokes amidst the 17th Century splendors.

In the photo it isn't clear whether you are looking toward me or away, but I remember you warning me that looking through a lens is not how to live a life—facing backward, everything superimposed, as though trying to see what might come next by watching what has already happened. I tell you this is the only way I know how, as I raise my camera for another toast. I say *Smile, Cheers,* and *Abracadabra*. I tap my magic wand, wait for the flash of light. Days, months, years later, even when you see this living proof, you won't understand what it is I have done. This making. This magic. This time. Standing. Still.

Apology to a Truck Driver

Please accept my deepest apology
for the scene I am nearly positive you saw.
Our passion was (at that time)
newly recognized and we simply could not wait for our arrival
at home (admittedly just a few minutes' drive
from the side of the road where we paused)
so certain were we that the street would remain
deserted for at least the minutes
our hastened actions took.

Perhaps had we not taken the time to crawl
into the backseat we might have spared you
the peepshow, although I'm sure your imagination
allowed for more exposure than the moment's
facts actually permitted: a slight flash of flesh,
the red lacy bra providing a peek-a-boo cleavage shot,
the briefest glimpse of thigh exposed, knee
leaning hungrily into another body.

A glance so hasty you weren't quite sure what it was
that you saw; in fact, you did a double-take;
the people, the car, the headlights already blurring
beyond your peripheral vision, and you
disappearing into the desert like a lonely, stray
cat slipping quickly through a hole in an endless
length of fence, looking for the next
doorstep from which to feed.

The Saddest Music in the World

At first you won't notice the sadness of it.
You may even smile when you hear its melody,
stand up and applaud the sound, which speaks
such a simple language: the sudden urge
for a drink or the longing to hold a cigarette

between two stained fingers. So enchanted are you
by the smoke, by the notes
rising into the air, you forget where
you were born, how to tie your shoes,
your name and that of your lover
or child—and just when you think the voices

you hear are from angels, are from god himself
speaking directly to you through song (so sweet
and deceptive is this sound!) you look down
at your hands and you look down at this child
standing next to you, who you are certain
must be yours (but what is her name again?)

you look down at your feet on the ground,
and drop the cigarette which is just beginning
to burn your fingertips. You try to listen, really listen
to the music, which you are certain is telling you
that no one is listening, and the realization of this
is so sad it will knock your goddamn socks off.

Building the Ark and Living in It

I.

It's one of those dreams where I am myself,
but also the nameless wife of Noah.

My husband is building a boat in the garage behind our house.
Night after night he works late, waves away

invitations to dinner parties with friends,
ignores the noise complaints from neighbors

annoyed by his hammering, the power tools
motoring on until nearly dawn.

Just trust me, he says. From the diagram I know
it's a motorboat, but not one built for speed.

All that matters is that it can't sink, he tells me
when I suggest red racing stripes down the front.

During his smoke breaks I catch him
looking up at the clouding sky with concern.

What have you done with my husband?
I joke as I bring his dinner out into the garage.

He simply points to a pile of wood in the corner,
grunts *hand me another two-by-two* in response.

Most nights, when he finally comes inside
he goes into his office and prays.

I know he wants me to join him,
but my faith is wearing thin, along with my patience.

II.

And then suddenly I wake up (but not actually
awake, just in the dream). I am stuck

in this boxy boat feeling like Skinner's daughter,
only it's not quite as bad as the books

have led me to believe. It's cozy,
actually, and climate-controlled.

After too many rounds of Trivial Pursuit
there is nothing to do but wait for the rain

to stop falling long enough to get off this fucking float.
After a month of weathering nothing remains

dry enough to wear comfortably;
neither the shirts of happiness nor sorrow;

not the pants of stubbornness
or the skirts of apathy.

These days there is no slipping
out of this life and its expectancies.

Even the stockings are mold-
covered, need to be tossed overboard.

God only knows what I pray to anymore.
Out of boredom I wait for a miracle.

Something that will tell me the right decision
is believing You exist.

Someday I will find the mountaintop ready:
patiently green and lush.

I will open the door to a promise I can believe in,
and the meat of my sacrifice will smell sweet.

Someday a rainbow might guarantee me
an eternity of explanations, might grant me a name,

but for now I simply wait
for the floodwaters to recede.

With half-hearted blessings
I send a dove out into this landlessness.

For once it will be a good sign
when something I care about does not come back to me.

But he returns every time. *Still too wet*
is what I am certain he is trying to say,

as he offers up hope
in the slim branch of an olive tree.

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