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THE ONCE LIVED LIFE

by
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Committee Chair

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APPROVAL PAGE

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The New World

Not in your words, but in what you failed to do, it
was as though you had left me there
near the shore, all alone.

So when I closed my eyes
the fire came, turning everything to light
and then to ashes,
flakes of skin falling to the sea.

I still lived but not in the present.
The future stirred—
it was hidden from me too.
I was not dead, but prevented from dying:
I began to feel everything, and I was afraid.

The Sowing Fields

Descent

When I awoke, the world was covered in a dark light,
the fields were still breathing, but they had lost all their luster,
and all their shine, the black birds were still black, but their feathers
were longer now, like strands of silk, unfolding from behind.

The Sowing Fields

On the Juneteenth when
I was four, my mother
entered the watermelon patch
and plucked the smallest of the melons.

She held it in her arms,
cradling it close to her chest,
like it was a newborn waiting to suckle.

While I watched, Mama lifted it up to the sky
and plunged it to the ground,
drowning our brown toes with
the pink afterbirth.

Afterwards, she fell to her knees,
and sifted through the angry guts and
black seeds.

What are you doing?
I asked her sticky hands.

I'm searching for the heart,

She whispered to the ground as she grabbed it.

Mama cupped it in her palms

gently,

like a firefly.

I stared at the small thing,

and it blushed red, then sang to us stories of the fields, the

slaves, and the sacrifice of praise.

Cricket Nights

The woman goes out to the porch at sunset,
listening for the chirp of crickets,
creaking the blues on their skinny legs.

Tonight they ask her for a tune:
a song for empty beds and deep pockets, to
dull the pain,

and she gives it to them—

lays down in the grass and turns a
tune for every tiny lover,

speaks to them in a voice louder than the stars.

Moonshine Stew

Papa Duck and Aunt Yettie, Lil' Mama and Fat Cat

Romp around all night in the shack on Shaw St.

Always hoopin' and hollerin' and making a mess, Papa

Duck swinging his voice and heaving his chest And

yelling from the top of his lungs

What to do to make his special moonshine stew:

¼ teaspoon of rent payments (late)

¾ cup of gin taken from the Fat Cat lounge in Chicago ¼

tablespoon of blood from a hand torn on a cotton stalk 2lbs

white feathers from a church mother's hat.

Bring to a boil and stir.

Add:

½ cup of sweat from the sugar cane workers on Agnes St.

3 lost vertebrae from little mama's back, (the ones she lost 50 yrs. Ago while doing Mrs.

Johnson's laundry)

¼ tablespoon of salt (Be careful, too much can make it bitter.) ½

cup of Fat Cat's whiskey (that will get ya good and drunk!)

½ teaspoon of tears

Take the back bones and crush them down to a fine powder.

Empty them into the pot (don't worry, little mama has gone numb, she can't feel it).

Reach up to the sky and gather some light from the moon,

Take a little bit from the stars too,

Hopes deferred,

Hold them in your hands until they crackle and burn,

Throw them into the pot quickly,

Stir. Squint. Swallow.

Let it burn down your throat.

Let it put hair on your ass.

Mama's Song

How I love this little baby boy, sweet brown sugar to my bleeding heart, small and shirtless,
belly big and round, from eating all the cornbread settled on the stove.

Flicker and Flame

I chased her through soggy sorghum fields,
guided only by the light of fireflies
tracing constellations onto the nighttime sky.

We tumbled to the grass as I grabbed her shirt,
and became one flesh in the thickness of mud.

I held out my hand to help her up
but she spat in it, rising up stubborn
and defiant.

The spit slid down my hand
and onto the ragweed that so often
swung rashes onto our legs.

It was then she pecked my cheek
and rushed home carrying
a limp from our fall.

I didn't even notice the dinner time call

from my mother,

but only the thickness inside of lips
on a body that had not yet found its curves.

I would have chased her down,
just to do it all again,

but I chose to walk home slowly
in the flicker and flame of fireflies,
as my body blushed and bloomed all over.

Mama Humphrey's Blues

Mama Humphrey looks out the window into the sky, her hands in hot dishwater,
Dreaming gritty plates into clean china.

She likes to wash dishes.

The running rinse water drowns out the noise of children

And the memories of her husband fade into the background.

Mama Humphrey looks out the window into the sky, her hands in hot dishwater,
Dreaming bloodied lips into red rose petals.

She likes to wash dishes.

The running rinse water drowns out the noise of children

And the memories of his whiskey sweat fade into the background.

Mama Humphrey looks out the window into the sky, her hands in hot dishwater,
Dreaming swollen cheeks into silken shores.

She likes to wash dishes.

The running rinse water drowns out the noise of children

And the memories of his sharp fist fade into the background.

Mama Humphrey looks out the window into the sky, her hands in hot dishwater,

Dreaming sore thighs into soft feathers.

She likes to wash dishes.

The running rinse water drowns out the noise of children

And the memories of his nasty breath fade into the background.

Mama Humphrey looks out the window into the sky, her hands in hot dishwater,

Dreaming the opened screen into a locked door.

She likes to wash dishes.

The running rinse water drowns out the noise of children.

Night Terrors

He has a strong memory of someone chasing him,
someone familiar but not, at first, visible;
now, a large woman, carrying a leather strap in one hand,
moving closer, walking not running,
and sometimes smiling because escape, for him, is impossible.

For who ever knew a good boy to forsake his mother, or
a small child to forsake his own:

and though he runs into tall grasses
and though he cowers there out of sight,
and though he prays God kill the rising sun
and bury it deep in the night,

he must always, like anyone,
in hunger or in thirst return.

Theft

Envy

The flying monarch flutters wildly,
ten thousand portraits in its wings.

Once, I saw one deep
in the meadow,
sucking nectar from a milkweed shrub.

I swooped it up,
tore off its wings
and tossed its body to the grass.

The fire ants came in droves,
surrounded the carcass
and carried it far into the weeds.

I stuck the wings into my mouth, lightly,
swallowed them because I wanted to fly.

Seedtime

--for my birth father

Yes, the yellow flowers
were weak and fragile,
but they could still hold light:

They were, in this world,
like tiny suns,
tossed and scattered
across the withered fields,
but still alive and breathing,
their roots prodding down into the ground.

Yet you did not care for them.

They were to you as good as dead,
seeds to be discarded, abandoned;
and there was, in your eyes,
no compassion, no sympathy for their feeble forms
still growing up into their glorious bodies.

But I still followed you there,
like a good son,
to that clearing near the edge
of the earth,

the place you brought me
on that day, when you said goodbye,
without words, without remorse,
and nothing hidden in your palms
but silence,

a jagged blade pulled from your back pocket, so
cold, so distant,
and lonely as the falling stars.

Lamentation of Leaves

It is certain, even these leaves will
become fragile and dry.

She thought they were no longer
readable, as though the seasons
had ceased their countings of time.

I remember the way that our love
was etched onto their palms,

how I beheld them as they bloomed
beside each peach blossom,
watched them flap against the wind.

When torn, their skeletons settled
under the falling snow
and died in the rewriting of things.

In Slumber, In Darkness

—to the aborted

The body of my dead brother
is the only thing I can find
beside my pillow.

Settled at night, I can feel the imprint
of his small frame,
as it shoves onto my side of the bed
and pulls at the covers.

His is a space that doesn't forget itself,
a portion of the bed still wet in the mornings.

Snake Charmer

-for my mother, who was once a child

The belt hung on the closet door like a dead snake
like a flaccid body fixed upon a rusted nail, limp and docile; and
when she was young, she stared at it,
and even touched it once, to see if she had, like her father, the
power, to summon its spirit,
and to cause it, for a moment, to spring to life again.

In her family there were many secrets,
and of those this is merely one—
that her father was a snake charmer,
that he could at his every whim give life to lifeless things.

She had seen the ritual countless times,
her father wobbling around the house,
the smell of liquor on his breath, his body moving to and fro, the
ferocious dance, like a witch doctor,
like one who conjures up the ancient things of the earth,
like one who strangles both the body and the soul.

And when he stared at her, she could not move.

And when he struck her legs, she could not run.

And when he clutched her throat, she could not breathe.

And when he let her go, she could not die.

When I was Three

When I was three, my mother sat on the scorched grass in
the back yard and told me how the crickets
toiled for years to find their lovers.

This I remember clearly,
though she will say that she never spoke
such things. That her search for love was dead,
that I was its resurrection, that my touches could
make her feel young again.

The Elder Brother

The sun is rising behind the mountains,
but the surface of the ground is slow to warm.
Tied to the trunk of a sycamore tree is the bag of the older brother, his
silhouette hunched over beneath the tree's branches,
his stomach pulled tight as a board, his belly full of hunger and thirst,
and no one to hear him but the mare
standing quiet in the distance, listening to the autumn wind,
sifting ocean salt from the circling breeze, and no one to feed her but
the boy, rolling up his pallet from the night,
dusting from his blanket the chilled pieces of broken earth, the
memory of the sea_ azure, and green like emerald,
like the path winding through the meadow's brook, leading towards the city,
towards the outer courts, towards the fires moving home.

White Noise

The days of summer have grown hot, again,
and loud again too, the rushing waves,
so disturbing, the legions of seagull calls cluttering the
white air, there is a need for solitude now, and room
for the soul to breathe.

Theft

I learned early on that you would be
the death of me, your crying in the night,
your want for more,
your insatiable craving for milk,
the pain of your teeth biting into my breasts,
bruising them like a violent lover,
though I told you I had nothing left to give.

You had no idea, the evil growing inside you:

Even in your infancy, I could see it rising up,
your demanding nature, like your father,
always screaming, always telling me what to do,
making me open my blouse to you, making me hold you close as
though you were really hungry,
as though you didn't like touching at my breasts, as
though my body was still yours for the taking.

When I was Eleven

So darkly lit, so cluttered with birdsong

I put my hands to my ears.

And that high loud shriek in the night, was it
actually the dog, or some other beast, growling at my side?

I think the room was large,
and the house almost empty when I grabbed

the knife from the kitchen drawer
and stood in front of the living room mirror

to take from myself that which was never my own.

You called to me that night,
but still I couldn't come,

Through the thin walls, I could feel your voice. I
begged to the blade for comfort.

On Ash Wednesday

We never wanted to lose one
ray of light,
yet we knew that it would happen still,
and that the leaves would fall and break away, for
the earth must yearly grieve
and why not us too,
with all that is hidden inside,
invisible to the naked eye,
buried beneath the choppy waves of the sea,
that which must surely die or rise again?

What Will Happen

Treachery

What shall I make of you
and this tiny fullness
settled inside your palm like
a pomegranate seed, bloody
and small?

Is this your punishment for me: to
always gaze upon what
cannot be touched and smell
what can never be tasted, a thirst
left unfulfilled?

Or do you wish to share it
with me, God willing—
and let me hold,
for a moment, how it feels
to know that I am held?

After Affect

I had your picture in a frame
but then I gave that frame away
and laid the photo in the dresser drawer
beside the closet. But I don't know
what to do with it.
If I remove you from the drawer,
then I am a coward,
If I keep you locked up, then you will always stay.
Even now I cannot look at it.

The Meanings

I am tired of feeling pain,

I no longer want my heart—

But how will you live without your pain,

how will you become fully human?

I want to go back there,

to the place beyond the warmth of the sun.

But you cannot go there,

there is not enough

life in that place,

not enough room for growth, for vegetation

the splitting silence

always hiding things, so—

Then I choose to become a scavenger,

to take my pickings among the dead things

of the world, like this season, resembling death

stealing rays from sun

My mother, she was
a gracious woman,
that's what I always believed,

that's what I created in my mind,
what I said—

It is hard to remember
everything, hard to look
upon the bodies

of the dead,
still moving in their restless sleep,
unshaken by the rustling branches.

I have to act as though
they were really coming back
to me,
as though they were really mine

I want to punish myself,
because I wanted it to be true,

like I had imagined it—

I think that I wanted too much,
had too many wishes

for someone to love me,
inside the
basement of the cold house

locked inside the winter's chill,

too cold to feel it,
too young to witness its birth.

What Will Happen

There will be a sudden noise,
like juggernauts churning the sea.
You will go away from here in your body:
near the meadow, it will happen,
the red birds startled in the trees
will wander to the fields,
will ignite the dying grasses with their fiery plumes
until there is only darkness in the land,
and a sharp light piercing through the trees.

Walking

I went to the edge of memory once
every particle needing light,
like the bottom of the ocean's floor,
and nothing ever as it seems,
the stars moving their speech in fragments, in
slivers of waves always flowing,
where you found me, within the darkness my
body falling towards the sea.

The Things I Wished For

The landscape forms in my mind——

The earth grows dark. The horses sleep

in their yellow stables,

the red-berried trees have been

plucked bare, the branches

broken off and left beside the dirt road, the

autumn leaves gathered together

in rank and file, like tiny flakes of copper,

light to the touch:

These are the things I wished for,

what I wanted——

my mother standing at the window,

saying

come close,

come close,

sorghum seeds filling her palms,

the fields in bloom, growing long-ways full and wide,

the world moving ever so carefully, its memories formed in perfect order.

Migrations

It is experience that binds our migrations
like birds moving forward towards the south
and then to the east, wings almost touching,
bright beaks dripping with frost,
their small forms circling the fields like fluttering suns;
no longer tied to the earth, no longer split between the flesh
and the spirit, the marrow and the bone,
until the body, and what is within the body
calls them back to the abandoned fields.