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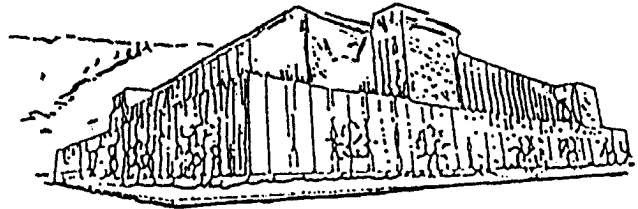
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Cartographies of Flight

by Sheila Fiona Black

B.A. Barnard College, 1983

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

The University of Montana

1998

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Cartographies of Flight

poems by
Sheila Black

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I

The First Map of You

The small birds converge, converge
With their gifts to a difficult borning

- Sylvia Plath

Birth Stories

(for Vicki Amorose)

The body of a woman
is always poised for betrayal.
The cell splits,
the belly hardens.
Even the most savage reactions
occur in silence.

What you hear
in their voices is what
cannot be explained:
how easily they slid
into that strange, lonely place -
the rock,
the hard surface,
the frozen lake of rain,
the new life that grows:
a shape in a bottle,
a dumb shaping of dough.
It is a miracle,
accomplished by the body alone.
It consumes itself, uses
everything.

What you hear in their
voices: how like a drowning it was:
Death flooded in,
the heart stuttered,
the lungs accordioned.
Even the skeleton
became a mere husk,
something like the cocoon of
a butterfly or a ripe
seed pod, the hardest bones
growing soft, opening
opening. Women weep
before it.

Labor

A penny dropped in a well -
How far down
the echoes travel!

Hoof-beats traversing
the black roots,
the sudden mirror of metal --

a knife, the bared cry
of a huddled creature caught
in the steel circle

of the trap, the spiraling
flood of the sea spilling out
over the silver sand.

Here is where you must go
to get there: farther than you
can remember. Here is where

you must voyage: the weight
of dark water down your throat,
all salt and harshness,

the darkness pressed close
as hands. Here is where
you must get to: down the single

tap root to where it begins -
a clear jelly, a blood
thread, this new heart

blooming clean in your hand.

The First Map Of You

The first time I saw you,
you were distant as the heavens:
A picture full of snow
on a screen no larger
than the square of
my two hands.

Your image, frost-white,
translucent, each vein
clearly visible as the veins
on a new leaf. I could
not imagine how I could
ever touch you,

not even as softly
as a finger caresses a drop
of rain, or trace the
curl of your spine --
colorless shrimp floating in
your flush of grey stars.

You swam alone in that
hermetic sea, desiring
nothing. What was there
to love? Your mouth was
sealed shut, your eyes
two blank pits,

prints of fingers
made in salt dough.
And your brain the
smallest flower I have
ever seen -- all spiky
petals, no center.

I could see straight through
you into nothingness.
Yet each time
your image shone clear:
a ghost thrown by
a heartbeat

(continued)

the small shiny hook
of you reached out
to snag me by the throat.
The clear blood line forever

Reeling
unreeling.

Night-Swimming

Floating on my back in pond water,
my face facing the luminous dark, night-swimming
I think of how you floated -
twisted, submerged inside me,
clinging to life
by a thick blood thread.
At the end voices came at you
from a distance. You learned to turn
your face towards them,
your eyes perceiving only light
and dark - a spectrum of golds,
the line of the umbilicus,
black against a dense ruby sun.
I think of how when it was time
to come out, you bent
your head against the taut muscle
of the cervix, sliding your body
down the long tight fist of the vagina.
And as you shot out into the air
you took on your true shape,
fast and fluid,
silver fish rising out of heavy
water with the ease of pure light.
You dove headfirst into the world,
and as a match strikes stone
to give off flame, you bloomed,
dull blues warming to beiges
and pinks. And so you joined us,
slid across the dark river,
the ancient salt draining from
your lungs as in one gulp you learned
the calculus of living breath
by breath.

Lafayette Park in Autumn

This is marigold time.
Even the air has the smell of memory,
a drawer kicked open.
I stroll my daughter to the park
under the miraculous canopy of changing
trees, breathe in the schoolyard
scents: bitter chalk, false cherries
the floral must of leaves
under our feet. Twice this week
ghosts rise from their graves,
leering Jack pumpkin heads,
black and white skeletons
rattling cold jewels.
They come bearing gifts:
foil-wrapped candies, white beans
marked with black crosses,
sugar skulls etched with Christian
names. I take my daughter's hand
as we cross the street. Under the shadow
of the park, in the thick smell of marigold,
old fingers clench young wrists,
leaving red rings like
the rings inside trees. How breathless
the world is! Overhead leaves rattle
like beaten metal, coppers, golds,
the bounty of the tombs of kings.
I clutch my daughter's hand.
The sky watches, blue and still.
It has seen this before -
leaves falling, the slow seepage of love.

Milk

Your dimpled head on its slender stem
is too much beauty. I did not ask for it.
It descended on me like snow out of a dark sky,
I did not want your gift of sainthood.
I would return it if I could
each time your cry leaps up
to reel me in. I put out my hands,
and they are stuffed with you.
I am flattened by the clear light
of your will. You know what you desire.
I am dumb on the subject.

Look, I am divided in my deepest part,
a gel split, my skin no house, but a nest.
Bits flake off wherever I turn.
And in my belly something rattles,
a heap of stones, my old hungers,
all gagged now. They will not sleep forever,
my heavy sisters.

Meanwhile what can I do
but cradle you to my breast?
The milk flows whether I will it or not.
You suckle, and your cheeks glow
while my blood blanches.
Why should I not wish to snap you blind,
split you in two - a small green shoot,
leave you exposed in this world of frost?
How can I be your only mother?
Your love scalds me like an angry moon.
White milk froths from me.
It smells of warm wool, the heat
of closed rooms.

The Ice Age

The shape of an elm in December:
a lace fan, but tougher,
a broom of splayed fingers,
a blue wood beneath its slick of ice.

Our coldest winter in thirty years.
Branches cracked off trees
with a gunfire sound,
The sidewalks smooth as murder -
a glass lake surface and beneath
a chronicle of furious eruption.
The geological record
in miniature, I told you -
here, signs of continental drift;
there, canyons bursting open,
fissures toward the molten heart.

You laughed at me, pocketed
the car keys. Moments later the frozen
engine, hacking, stuttering.
How could you imagine
how it was for us inside?

At forty below, the house gathered
around me like the folds
of a box. I could not see us
stepping out. Every morning
waving you off, our daughter
in my arms. Her face the red
papery skin of the newborn -
the skin that shows the slender
veins beneath. Warm against
my breast, she was the lava heart,
the pure fire that flares,
always subterranean, glow
the world opens to after great
violence, shaping us.

Tales of the Forest
(for Annabelle)

You slide out of my hand,
a silver darting thing, bending
the bright stalk of your corn-colored head
over the black twisted roots.

The trees here are old,
their russet drifts of leaves knee-deep,
staining your short denimed legs.
You turn toward me, lift

your arms as though rising
out of waist-high water.
We are frozen here like fish caught
between lake-bottom and sky.

The verdant light casts shadows
on our faces. We watch a slug leave
its slow, mucousy trail across
an emerald moss, white beetles

scurry from under a lifted
stone. This is a world
of silent things. Old stories
caught in the throat,

the fir trunks tinted red
like pillars of an abandoned pier,
there is no safe harbor here -
no quick way out of this place.

You have no notion of this.
To you the trees are merely tall -
benign godmothers spreading
their scratchy skirts

the ground a simple bed of green.
Even the spiderwebs tremble before you,
rolling diamonds. Later, you
will learn the tales of the forest:

(continued)

the paths lost and found,
the children who wandered under
enchantment, the tree where a father
tied a dead branch to a trunk

so it thudded in the wind
like the blow of an axe, making
his children believe he was near
long after he had gone.

II

Exiles

Now I live here, another island,
that doesn't seem like one, but who decides?

- Elizabeth Bishop

Exiles

(for Kemal Hassan)

We would not say a word
to each other those walks. We moved up
the sides of Montmartre, past
the stands of frites and merquez.
Warm April, the light a melted butter
on the cobblestones, our fingers
a lattice-work, a fence.
Women knotted their hands
in sacks of string. Children played tag
in alleyways, voices flying out
windows like scraps
of torn cloth.

Our time was short.
We did not know what we had
or what we would miss. Your face at night
startling when you removed
the black frames, thick lenses
of your glasses, a profile
stamped on a hard coin.
I sat next to you in your sister's apartment,
watched on a stiff loop of film
strung through a rickety projector,
the dictator shoot a man
in the head, the body crumpling
sideways, over and over. You told me how in the war,
you and the officers stuffed
your ears each night against
the cries of the boy soldiers. "Mama,"
repeated from every row.
How sometimes one of the officers
would go mad listening, slap the boys
on the cheeks. "Be quiet, be quiet,
I only want to sleep." Day marches through
hot sand, bodies torn apart
by hidden wires, sudden flares,
the way a body ripped apart glows bright,
skin like petals of a flower,
the red meat inside.

Your fingers rested on my belly,
its roll of rich fat.

(continued)

I still did not understand
what you were telling me: how easily
a thing is lost, how hard
it is to find what is misplaced.
Even retracing each step can mean nothing.
We look up and find ourselves
at the same corner and still
nothing is familiar.

Mission Street

The oranges in the fruit stall
are ripe. Ripped between the teeth
they would taste of blood and sawdust.
George has gone to buy a needle.
I see him on the corner talking
to a man in a red hat.
I see him on the corner talking
to a man with a tattoo,
the quick motion an embrace:
fingers gently entwining. Then
they break apart and turn away.

In his room in twilight once
I saw a glass of bloodied water -
his blood blooming orange in the window
as the drug bloomed in his body,
a sun in a hot country,
a heat so faithful
it banished the cold fear
from his bones.

Now George comes back
to the fruit stall where I am standing.
It is twilight almost and the oranges
glow like little suns.
George stretches out his hands
as if to heat them.
Everywhere there is a smell of oranges,
so many oranges for a moment
we are standing in the middle of an orchard,
brushing against the dark glossy leaves,
the heavy gold balls still warm
to the touch.

Tattoo Man of Coney Island
(for Michael O'Brian)

The bruised Cadillac
in the heel of the roller coaster
has its windows shattered
into shapes of scars
and spiderwebs, a jagged heart
outlined in purple nailpolish
cuts the hood. Someone has
written your name
in the inky sprawl of a crab.

Your body like the body
shattered in this car
leaks across the sidewalks in front
of Bellevue. Our nights in the Mars Bar
you swore the gin and tonics
would do you in, sweet
tonic water turning to sludge in your veins,
snuffing each bright cell,
ankles first. Now images of the Virgin
Mother and Lady Liberty
darken over each foot,
Mary's face becoming blue
as her robe, and Liberty's flag
featureless as this hulk
of metal that lurks beneath
the whizzing lights of cars,
the volleys of shrieks
rising and falling along
the carapaced hills.

I am standing in this rattle
looking over at the sign
on the quonset hut of the Freak Show
where your name no longer appears
between Big Gulp Eddie
and the Fish Girl.
And you are the ghost of a gesture,
a man in a rented room
clenching fingers into fists,
stabbing again and again
to uncover a clear line.

Look, it is evening here.
Shadows lift from the oily waters,
roll over land

(continued)

as raindrops slit from the side
of a cloud, a sudden dimness
pocketing the park.

You wrote me
from your hospital bed
of your body and of the pictures
woven into your skin, colors
you once recognized by the sting
of the dye in the needle,
I look at myself, you said.
I look at myself, and I am a chalk garden,
melting in the rain.

Providence

I must have known it was hopeless,
watching you shave in the basement
bathroom, the way you handled
a razor so carelessly,
your cheeks dotted with blood.
The sheets in your mother's house
so cold we slid between them,
a vellum crackling. Nothing but
each other, the rubbing of
our bones, a small flint.
At night mockingbirds sang out our window,
voices calling in the spring.
Your mother lay motionless
in her blankets. When the pipes froze
she refused to call in
the plumber. You and I were glad.
Together, we ran a hose
from the pump by the garage,
busied ourselves boiling great cauldrons.
We wanted life to be simple
as that work of lifting, carting,
storing, preparing. Wanted to believe
if we performed the proper
rituals, we could keep the raw flame
between us alive. Uncover
providence in that failed mill-town
built by stone-faced Puritans,
the river a slab of granite
oiled with the dark smell of fish,
and the woman in the alley downtown
who sang a fado, softly
calling in the lost fishermen.

Cracking
(for Andrew)

1.

It will not shape itself
into words, what happened to you.
The dark tower rose.
The speakers were multiple.
They contradicted.
They were voiceless --
whistles maybe, groans, a hefted sound.
They made you a gear turning until
you could feel the clockwork,
the linking of moments as something physical,
a kinetic embroidery
shifting with each turn of metal.

Flints sparked.
Blue flames surrounded you.
You were being transmitted.
You were stretching,
incandescing. Nothing
was safe from you. The telephone melted.
Assassins drank the milk
and honey you offered them.
Dead rats slid under your door.
The woman downstairs unbuttoned
her blouse, snakes sprouting
from each breast.

Moments turning on one another,
new correspondences,
cells in a hot box,
colliding.

2.

*World you are made of clay.
The grid taken off, what is left?
A roiling, a shriek, a burn,
an embarrassment of skin?*

(continued)

3.

All you could say was:
so many bodies, so many little rooms.
You wanted to be generous,
a Jesus, tell us what you had learned,
break off your skin,
feed it to us, flake by flake.
You were everything, you
were nothing.

They had to slow you down,
stuff you with filings of lead.
And still you remember
only the speed of that movement
as if you were a symphony,
notes striking the air,
carving it.

How you moved like
a wave with eyes,
curling and frothing for miles.

Pasture

(for Duncan)

If I could I would tell you a story
that made all the pieces fit -- this day:
an ordinary day when you stepped out into
the pasture at dusk, the hour the light
becomes a negative of itself,
your blue shape cut out from the sky like
a dark piece of paper, how you moved across
the pasture with sure steps, calling in
a low voice for the horses to come in,
their humped shapes, soft hills, turning
away from you as you came. They did not
want to come in. It was an ordinary day,
in spring, the grass newly green,
the fresh shoots pushing up between
the used brown stalks, numberless,
glittering. Here is how you walked:
stepping quick across the pasture,
speeding up and rising onto the balls
of your feet as though, like the horses,
driven by the reckless scent of
growing things. You were calling them,
but they did not want to come in.
Close up their chomping was fearsome.
They were nosing the ground, gnawing
at the tender blades of grass as if
they meant to swallow the earth whole,
seize it into their restless mouths,
silage under their rolling tongues,
hold the sweet grass smell forever in their nostrils.
You looked small beside them, though you are not a
small man. I watched you lay your broad hands
on their broad backs, strike the white one lightly across
the rump and race with him toward the barn,
over the field of grass growing and seeding,
over the field of blossom.

III

Las Meninas

What does love mean
what does it mean "to survive"
A cable of blue fire ropes our bodies
burning together in the snow

- Adrienne Rich

Abuse

Let it rest and then
you will remember everything.
You will find me again,
a mute hitchhiker by the side
of your road -
lunar, vast, lonely,
wearing the raincoat of your dreams.

We will drive all night
down your highways, past scarred parking lots
where no one ever goes,
trace ice-cold signs that blink,
Food, Rest, Lodging.
We will never stop, but go,
watching the drowned headlights
struggle against the road
like fish on a hook.

Imagine how it will be, just
the two of us, doing the pony in front
of gas station coke machines,
plugging quarters into jukeboxes
in the buzz of all-night truck stops,
studying the faces of strangers,
playing all the hits.

There is nothing to be afraid of
this time. You can do what you like.
I will be your suicidal baby,
and you can be the dirty old man
fingering me under the tables.

I will stay with you always.

This time I will not argue.
This time I will play
to the end,
I will lie in your arms
flat, cauterized,
a doll of dough.

(continued)

Pinch her, move her, she doesn't mind.
See how her mouth smiles?
See how her eyes never blink?
She is far away.
Handle her like a basket of fruit.

Her skin is a miracle.
It never shrinks or stretches.
It is never too warm or too cold.
Punch it, kick it.
You will not leave a bruise.

She does not feel anything.

Belle De Jour

Her body is an icon
a candle flame
on the running reel
drawing the eye like whiteness remembered.
Her eyes widen as the massive man
clicks temple bells
between his fingers

No blood touches her thighs
yet her posture
long limbs on scattered pillows
gives us back
words we have forgotten,
a Rosetta Stone of desire:
hand and rope
chafing and tenderness
the well-like sound of a twirled chain
stilling
to silken rustle.

She throws back her head
palely her lips open
the pupils of her eyes
congeal to hard blackness
beneath her wood creaks
an antique song
of rocking in the melancholy green
of striped sycamores

She is twisting
in space a child
pumping arms legs
sunlight dappling
a tremulous water

She remembers this:

time filling her
night stuffed in an envelope
inside a space swirling

Her heels click down hallways
She puts her hand
to the round gleam of a doorknob
hears a bell
ringing and ringing

from the other room.

1918

1.

Her slow brother sleeps
with the geese in the glass
porch on the south side of
the house, the place of longest sun
even in winter, his gray eyes
two milky stones. It is no crime to
use a rope in such cases. She cleans
him when he is soiled, her job
between wringing necks of chickens,
snapping ends of green beans,
the smell of him - earth, chicken
cold urine. What is him
and what is the geese? She believes
he loves the big gander, the one
with the hardest beak (see how his
arms are bit, decorated with blue
scars, red circles of ringworm?),
its hefty triangular body
a pillow, a stone.

She feeds him out of the buttercup bowl.
Gray rags of frigid meat.
You have to hold his jaw so he will
swallow. Like this, yes.
Don't coddle.

After in the kitchen she boils water,
washes her long copper hair
with lye soap, rinses with cider vinegar,
braids it in smooth coils,
dreams of an emerald ribbon or
one sky blue.

2.

Summer is listing, the ground a hard
yellow. Light breaks on the horizon,
in slivers. And one morning
you wake up and the grass is frozen
in a black circle, a mark like breath.

(continued)

3.

She sings: "I will marry a blue soldier." The girl from Barbados (the sugar merchant's daughter) tells her: not a porch, a *glacis* we call it.

The word is a sound that starts in her spine, a shiver as when an icicle cracks off a rain-gutter, a noise her brother would make, his morning mouth opening, a musty-sleep smell: new rosy potatoes buried in thick clay a waking sound - surprised - similar to the hiss a goose might make. *Glacis*, she says, pushing red carrots down his throat. (Should she loose her hair, let him tug at the sheen?) *Glacis*. It is the click of dancing feet, the scrape of claws on smoothed stone, or the aspen tree shaking, shaking until every leaf falls. And she will marry a soldier.

4.

They come with veils and masks, cotton and cambric. What for? She is lying on panes of ice. The sheets ripple. A *glacis*. Light slides in. Blazes from her eyes. She is irradiating - a beam.

Where is her slow brother? He sleeps with the geese at the bottom of the pond, his fists full of milky tadpoles.

Listen, you must get out of this bed. Listen, here is the blue soldier. Has the aspen lost every leaf? She can see blue hills on her arms. She can see each wire hair on her legs.

(continued)

And look, there, on her pillow,
severed and flickering -
two long red braids bound in
emerald ribbon.

I, Antoinette

1. Cops Who Kill

You could say she was walking
large, the pump of her heart
pressing through her body,
a gas that had to find its
way out - blue radium, steam
from manholes, sweat
on a styrofoam cup.

Her badge, her gun, a costume
she puts on piece by piece,
building herself from
the outside in.

Their heads are thin gray
balloons. She knows the skull
can hold a voice,
even old skulls beached
on a roadside. Their heads
are about to explode.
The skin pops,
fingers pushing
from the inside out.

They will talk to her as
if they loved her,
their knees round on the
tacked-down linoleum floor.
Bone plates, colors of
the inside of shells,
large papery seeds you pick up
crush in your hand
to see what comes out.

A nest of baby spiders.

The owner's life is already
jerking itself out in the meat locker.
She sees him hump the ground.
The others will use all the words
she used to beg to hear.
Please. Don't. No.
Please. Listen.

*I was doomed from the day
I was born.*

(continued)

2. Girl in a Red Yard

When she was small,
girl in a red yard
in a blue dress, her skin kept
peeling off.
Didn't want
to stay on her bones.
Like she had no skin,
everything against her eyeballs
hitting just that sharp.

*In Daddy's closet, the wide dark.
Jackets with brass buttons.
So much shine in there. Pieces of me.
Smell of shoepolish. Round cans
with their metal thumb of a hinge.
Inside, the black oil.
Smear it on my face to keep
on my skin. Not there, not back there
where he keeps finding me,
tugging my snarly braids, saying,
whatare you doing girl?*

What do you think you are doing?

*I felt what I felt. Something
in my chest so undone
I had to stuff down raw bacon
to keep it in, brand my palms,
cut chunks out of my flesh,
so I knew I was there,
my pitiful four-limbed body,
mine.*

*Evidence: one open can
shiny streak across my face.
He takes me to the mirror,
makes me look. Shame.*

I have ruined my blue dress.

3. The Air in the Restaurant

They make their mouths
circles, down on all fours
they wail and they sob.

(continued)

She would like to comfort them
for loving her so much.
That man in the meat locker,
he is still. What will she do
if she stops now?

She feels the black streak
on her hand. It burns like
the oven's fiery element. She sees
the gray powder on her skin,
It will hold a surface to her body.

Their brains are paler
than she ever knew. They are
light pumice rock
woman use to scrape dead
skin from their feet.
They are light
sponge in the bath
Daddy squeezes on her back -
water from their eyes
zigzags down her spine.

*Fish-bone! Count the bumps,
one, two three, four.*

Their voices ran out too fast
for her to catch. The air is very quiet
in the restaurant. She
could play with the cash register
buttons, but her sense says,
take the money and go.

What brings you back here, girl?

She has to get the one who got away.
No, not that. She has to look
at what happened to their heads.
Girl in a red yard in a blue dress.

*Hey, baby, look I wrote Daddy one time -
'I was doomed from the day I was born.
I see that now. I hate
myself and my life.'
He never answered. But wouldn't
you think if he had
a person could have been changed?*

(continued)

4. A Can With a Shiny Hinge

Wait for the lethal injection.
It will be a green river color,
still under quick teeth.

Or maybe just thick red mud
black underneath,
a can with a shiny hinge,
shiny thumb clicking shut.

Brazil

Ma Chere Soeur: If you use
too many words you will have
nothing to say. At night
death moths circle the patio lamp.
Army ants make graphite-colored
rivers across the green marble floor.
At the edge of light in lawn chairs,
strings hammocking against
the packed ground, our mother and father sit.
We watch from a distance. Flora stands
between us and them. Her body smells
of talc and meo coracao; her skin
a polished wood.

Can you smell the row of limes
beside the distempered walls?
Where are last year's mangos?
Have the pits sunk into
the moistened soil?

What if I said love, too,
is a fruit, purple and speckled, the flesh
inside cream and crimson.
It tastes of sugar and tin.
You can boil it for hours,
crush the pulp against the walls
of an iron skillet and still
the flavor is unchanged.

Below the cherry glow of our parents'
cigarettes the pond laps, unsettled
by carp. Their fish-mouths suck
daily at our fingers.
They are old and toothless, little flames,
cooled, translucent,
white bellies and mole-like spots.
The largest has two blackened eyes.
He moves in circles through the water,
green, opaque, dangerous
with schistosomiasis. You wrote me
last year from a mid-sized
European City: "I think of Flora putting
her fingers to her lips, her scar
shining pale across her face."

(continued)

Remember the story she told us
about travelling to Receife with her brother?
How they drank their own piss?
What did it taste like, we asked.
Like salt, she said.
His long-sleeved shirt was missing
one sleeve, his arm flapped out of the hole,
I can see this, Samantha, though
I was never there. Did she love us,
do you think, or was that another story?
Where did her brother die?
Was it there on the road?
Do you imagine our garden still exists?
Or have they let it grow over?

Often, these days, derailed by fever,
my old slides melt and shimmer.
Brazil, I tell you, is always the future.

Charity Child, Oregon 1850

(from the journals of Matilda Jane Sager Delaney)

I might have been a window
or a pane of glass.
No matter how close I stood,
their eyes slid over me
as if I were a stopping place
to somewhere else,
a snag in running water.
For ten years I ate
beside them, yet they never
passed me bread, never filled
my cup with water,
or set a pinch of salt
between my fingers.

I saw it happen: my skin
stretch over my bones, clear,
shiny as the skin of water
over the smooth clay that silts
the bottom of a creek,
my eyes stop meeting theirs,
cloud over like a lake in winter,
blue, impenetrable.

In the kitchen I sprinkled drops
of scalding water on my forearms,
watched the blisters rise - white
puffy dandelion clocks, dug the tines
of a fork into my leg,
nicked the insides of my hands,
peeling back the skin
as if I were a gilded pear,
a blush apple.

No one said a word.

When winter came Mrs. Whitman
sent me to shear wool
from dead sheep. I washed
greasy hanks in the creek
until the water darkened,
a fine red crackling. I set
my cheek against the chill,
let it seed and blossom
inside me until I grew
heavy as river stone.

(continued)

"The love of God is a harsh
burden," Mrs. Whitman said
when they found me.

That spring I watched the gray
wood of the juniper fold in on itself,
the trees thicken, hunching
over to meet the wind. I listened
to cottonwood roots nose along creek beds,
the tumbleweed fist,
let the wind lift it,
carry it anywhere at all.
I stuffed my mouth with the juniper's
bitter blue berries, tasted
the hard sap of lodgepole, filled
the space under my fingernails with splinters
of rabbit brush, training myself
in the art of bitterness.

I belonged to this place now.
I sat at their table, grabbed
what I needed, cold mush, black bread,
brown coffee grounds. I chewed
them with my strong white teeth.

Squaw Creek Canyon

Where did Large Marge go,
after she hung out the linen,
watched the clothes dance
on a line, taking on shapes
of bodies that had left them?

In her creek the trout
are spots of coolness
It takes time to spy them,
separate their dark motion
from the play of shadow
and the ponderosas on the banks
smell of cantaloupe and cool vanilla extract.

Large Marge left her footprints
on this trail, a size ten
extra-wide, the sweat
of her palms has sunk into the rocks here
a smell of Ore-Ida
and Green Giant corn.

Her footprints weave
the trail. She must have learned
this place finger by finger
as the blind learn to read a text
as raised hills
and dipping valleys
Indian paintbrush in the dry
red soil above the waters
monkey flowers between the pebbles
when the creek gets low
in August.

Given any chance
the desert will flower and yet
I find bones of deer
where Marge left them,
skeletons of prairie dogs,
a small rat.

Who can not believe
the wind
does not stumble over them,
that they do not
contain a repertoire
of voices?

(continued)

Under brown-speckled shelf paper
in a drawer
of our trailer kitchen
I uncover Large Marge looking large
in a dim newspaper photo,
the headline of which reads:
Woman Lives Alone
in Canyon Fifty Years.

Her eyes squint against
the light, her shoulders a wall
Sullen, suspicious,
alone. Her handprint
outlined in grease on the green
refrigerator door,
its lines intricate
as dry leaf.

Outside along Squaw Creek the cottonwoods
smell of flesh
and their pale leaves
make a rustling money sound
in the dry breeze

In pioneer days women here
complained of the wind
how it entered them
through their mouths,
becoming other voices
inside them.

Forty Year Marriage

I know what she learned:
how to shear off
a piece of herself,
shut it away in a drawer
like her Irish silver -
tines and blades,
hollows of spoons flickering
in a blue soft cloth.

In the bleached light
of morning, she waited him out,
a baby dandled on her knee,
years perfecting the posture
of listening without hearing,
turning cold shoulders.
When he moved down
to the basement

the smell of bourbon
like gold Bartletts moldering
under the stairs, she still
slept in the double bed,
plumped the pillowcases,
twin monograms
intertwined as puzzle
rings, pieces

out of her hope chest,
the small stitches
darting, nervous as when
she first touched him,
finger at a time,
testing his outline
against hers. Why waste
time remembering?

Mornings she laid out
his leather strop, honed razor,
preserving the form,
harvested lint from carpeted
stairs, pressed his collars,
the clean steam rising
like the scent of her children.

Isabella in the Dark

(For my grandmother, Isabella McGee Easton)

"I am stumbling," she thinks.
"I am going down the hall that is sheeny
with varnish. This is my father's
house; this is the charity school." And she
knows it was fifty years if a day.
Time is a tunnel with a lamp at the end.
Was it the priest told her that?
And this room is lit by that lamp,
her room shivers with light, and she
is there again, walking the beach
at Millport - the tender colors
of stones beneath the frigid waters,
her children's arms coiling
to strike.

The sky is flame: October.
She hunches her shoulders, poised
on the ~~rest~~ behind them. She can almost see
herself in this picture - mouth pursed,
hair a tail of smoke. Here are Brian's long
legs, crane-hopping. Here is Moira's good eye
able to strike water with stone
just right each time - see how the mottled
pebble skips across, how it glides?

"I am falling," she says aloud, sitting
in a chintz parlor, not her own,
The others stare. Eyes gentled
by catarrh, faces scrubbed, they all look kind.
But it is not so. No. "I was here
and I was there," she sings.
"What are you murmuring about?" Matron asks.
She answers nothing. She is rocking
herself shut.

She is dimming, a blood light -
*the fire dies in the grate in the old house
on Crow Street; ice flocks the windows.*
Even her breath leaves its mark.

"Did I tell you how my Da kicked at me
with his tacketty boots?"
"Oh, hen, that was so long ago," Matron
says. "He'll be dead and gone and all."
"But I hate him still," she cries,
"and I love -"

(continued)

The boy sends the tea-cart shivering
over the pile rug. Side-to-side it goes;
it makes a moan, a baby-sound.
What was the beach she sat on? The name
he whispered as he pressed
sections of orange into her mouth,
the cold, sharp juice breaking like tin?

Christmas day it was -

*They sit on the pebbled beach. The farm lies by the sea.
Sheep crop at the grass as far as
the cliffs. She wonders why
they never fall, why the air in the coop
is so close, so dark.*

Where were the children? She can hear
them cry. Like the gulls they cry.
Were they there or had they not been born?

*The rounded stones are bleached -
blue, green, a soft reddish-brown,
tints of hens' eggs - how wretchedly
those creatures peck, until her fingers
bleed. "Isla Bella," he says,
the one who will never come back,
who feeds her from finger to mouth,
coal hair, coal eyes, and red,
red cheeks. "Isabella, beautiful
island."*

Velazquez's Las Meninas

This room is the world, opening
without threshold, the walls
a skin, layers of pigment glazing
into this shadowed gallery
of paintings which cannot be read,
but are composed of distant form,
bodies remembered.

A door cracks to whiteness.
The girl in the center curves
her rosy hand outwards,
her damask dress spread
like the sails of a ship.

You called this, *Portrait of a Family*,
then changed it to, *The ladies*
in *Waiting*, on their mobile faces
an indelible ink of love
and fear. Painter to the court
you dressed these walls.
Now on your black breast the sacred Flame
of Santiago hangs upside down.

Philip watches from a mirror, king
of cards in a place where
all hands have been played, scattered.
He watches, one of us.
Yet he seems to know we are there.
So do the others, their eyes sliding
sideways to take us in.

Only the dwarf stares out
past us, her body solid beneath
its dead blue velvets, her skin
ruddy as polished wood. She is your chosen double,
woman in the body of a child
who dances most nights for the King
of Spain, juggling balls of painted wood,
playing a fretted lute. Her hands mirror
yours suspended at their brushes.
This is the last time
you will touch paint to canvas,
map this enclosed room and make
of it a world cut open.

IV

Vivisection

The cry I bring down from the hills
belongs to a girl still burning
inside my head

- Yusef Komunyakaa

Personal History

Still it comes back,
the old sensation suffusing
like wine through the tendons,
the shape of what is missing.
I wake in the night
wishing I could unshed so easily
that stubborn kink, that curve
of bone. How could I have
been viewed so wrong?

Good Doctor, you arrive on
the scene wearing the mask of hero,
the uncanny light of your
third eye. Your gloved hands reach
inside me, fingers poised around a chisel,
What have I become?
I can no longer keep track
of all the changes. The marks
where you stitched me
are still here, a line of tracks
cutting a featureless field.

Photographs in the family
album have disappeared,
those left in from above
the waist only. I smile in them
like anyone.

Vivisection

How you bisected me -
the elegance of the scars.
The disease? It was not chemical.
You could not cure it.

I cling to this chill.
Watch how I unfurl
before it, a flag of myself,
mirror distorted. This body

is nothing. In an instant
I could transform it.
Now it is a lake spreading
outward, now small and blank

a flat stone poised
in a hand. Now it breaks apart,
only the grains of it.
Listen, how they drift and scratch.

The old shapes, the form
that was broken is still here.
Now it reassembles: a buzz, a communion.
It promises me courage,

other virtues, the rough shield,
freedom from pain. It
tells me I am this:
and this: tubes of calcium,

stars of blue phosphorus
burning, the tender milk
of magnesium, a blurred halo
of sulphur, russet

streak of oxidized iron.
Here is its reenactment:
chips fall from a chisel.
Joints burst into loud

red flower. A bird
flies out of my mouth
into the ceiling. Here is the part
you did not touch.

Children's Hospital, Easter 1973

That was a frozen season -
my icon: the jar of blood
snaking the I.V.,
a dark thread,
a chill valentine.

I will tell you of the hallways
scoured to gleam,
and how our cries softened the green walls,
eyes glistening, craning to see
the spot of light,
haloed, immaculate,
where the night nurses lounged
waiting.

Their bunched fingers
stroked our swathed limbs,
smoothing us like rumped cotton
as we shifted and poked out
like seeds

in our small bed of earth,
always too hot or too cold,
the traces of our lonely
and separate pathologies -
one falling, another risen up.

How angry I was,
my face a whitened knuckle,
my heart a black fist,
thirsting to break open.

Goodness

(for Lynette Harris)

We knew it hurt,
your legs melted candles,
toes fused together
into a rough blunt shape,
a lump of live
earth. We knew how she
spilled the pot of water,
letting it hiss over
you like a baptism in reverse.

And then the day she came
to see you after they let her out,
the way she stood behind
the pocked glass observation window,
thick glass nicked
by years of kids like us,
scraping by on crutches,
battered until
that dirty old glass
was patterned as handmade lace,
flecked with traces
of snow, leaves, flowers.

Her face as she watched you
cross that wide floor, sway backwards,
forwards, a shiny reed
waving in the water,
your fingers looped through
the curved metal crutches,
the gleam of them like knives.

You said to me later:
"They don't want her to see me,
but I love her, she loves me.
Love is a thing, well, you can't
understand. You have to get
over the bad parts, that's all."

Moving toward her, Lynette,
like a mermaid stepping
on open blades.

Nothing Broken, Erased

The brick block of the hospital
is gone now, Lynette,
the cracked green tiles
of the basement swimming pool
where attendants dipped our limbs
into the tepid water, stirring
them around like spoons
in soup. It is a parking lot
now: ten floors of empty space,
marked like places where
the beds should go. The cars
in their slots, one on top
of another, wait as we waited
in our casings of plaster.
Their dead lights reflect
the lights of the street, the dull
glass of the moon. Such sturdy machines!
A key turns and they whirl
to life. I watch them go and go,
their hard metal bodies,
the surety of each line - nothing broken,
erased, drawn over. They move
so swiftly, Lynette. They might almost
be gods, the way their lights
blaze out, the way they whiz
down these asphalted lanes,
a maze that leads to the heart
of this place, the basement room
where the swimming pool was,
where we practiced our kicks,
planted our feet, learning to make
step after step. Twenty years
have passed, Lynette. I no longer
walk with a crutch. I have become
one of the others we spoke of.
There is nothing here that can
tell me what I have been.

Injury

Oh, doctor, how I have weighed
it in my mind - ancient
injury, scab I must pick
and watch torn open,
tracing its archeology
with a perverse attention,
a sieve shaking dust
for a few shards of bone.

The first cut: yellow, waxy,
cool as butter,
and then the warm rush
like love in the meeting
of vein and blade -

a kind of deflowering
the two of us together:
you, brave surgeon, fumbling
over my crooked lines,
remaking the architecture,
chiseling, rearranging.

You promised
I would remember nothing.
Yet often I wake
and find myself back
in this green theater,
where I need do nothing,
where I am precious -
a raw material.

You survey me tenderly.
I am your own creation -
bandaged, vased as a flower -

a vessel of possible beauty

Your masked face shines over me,
blue as Mother Mary.

Reconstruction

I think of the trees there first:
how large and tender
they seemed, breathing green
above the brick colonials,
the loneliness of other people's
windows, glittering under the sulphurous
street lamps, past midnight
when the pills stopped
working and I could feel
my bones knitting themselves
into a new shape.

The rings of the trees accreted
slowly, one by one,
spread ripples from a dropped stone,
the healed bones hardening
a different white on the x-rays,
not even a ghost of the form
they had been.

The codeine was blue, shaped
like a small bullet. My mother
pressed it into my hands reluctantly.
She could not believe in such
simple relief of pain, believed
instead in clenching the lip
between the teeth. She had stayed
awake even when we were born,
had seen us slide out bloodied.
Where had I gone askew?

All summer they brought me trays
of food, bowls of plums
shimmering with water, cooked
spinach, a limp sea of green,
said, "Eat," but I was wary,
remembered the myths I had learned:
*If you take a single seed
you will stay down here forever.*

I swallowed the pills furtively,
felt myself plunge, a girl
down a well, my own voice arcing
back at me from the curved walls

(continued)

I was remade and I fell
searching my old self
in the trees above our house,
their age passing through me,
their green hearts blooming in me.
All I wanted was to remember everything,
the way a child asks questions
to resurrect the moment of origin,
the expression on the face
before it is born.

Cartographies of Flight

1. Coordinates

Take this hush now:
the snow in handfuls swirling
in front of our eyes.
Imagine we live always
in this flurry,
this blue of night brought
into day, white sheets
glazing the hills.

The cold is predictable.
The hands turn red,
then white; the feet go to pins
and needles. And just before
the situation turns lethal,
you are made warm,
warm all over:
an abandonment, a blanket,
a shroud.

Flap your arms. Remind one another
to keep moving. By flinging yourselves
backwards you can learn the shape
of flight. See the arch of arm here?
How tenderly the shoulder lifts?
Close your eyes. Think of the chill grains
as yeast-like, a rising.

2. Location

In fourth grade Mrs. Feldeman
said: *In a blizzard you
must dig yourselves under
the snow.* She promised us
it would be warm there,
the grass green, the waters
melting, condensing, a sweet
chlorophyll breath. That was Minnesota
where every school child
was expected to know
how to step off into whiteness
and re-emerge whole,
having safely buried oneself

(continued)

rise like the flapping
angels we draw, rise like Lazarus
from his deep bed
of cold ever-forgetful sleep,
refreshed, restored,
laughing.

4. Genealogy

Laughter from the Middle English
low, sound of a cow,
song of the to-be-slaughtered,
from the Greek *Kalein*,
to call or to summon.

Athena (or so Homer tells us)
made the suitors laugh
when she showed them their fate,
the accident that would befall them,
hoisting them until they could see
their slaughtered bodies,
pale, red-striped,
hulks of meat. Her worst cruelty,
Homer claims, was this gift
of laughter, turning them
for a moment into gods,
floating on slim, high-arched feet
over Odysseus's smoke-stained hall,
chill hilarity leaking from
their still-warm lips, her embrace
colder still.

5. Equation

In laughter one thing
takes the shape of another.
A summons becomes a warming;
a song becomes a means of detachment
Laughter is speech that will not
be given meaning. A sound that lifts
weightless. Laughter is how
I will call you when
it is too late for you to come -

when what is cold seems warm.

(continued)

6. Present Stance

The temperature always falls.
This is why the body
grows cold. And we laugh at
the shapes we make,
mimicking flight in the paralyzed
arcs of our arms.

Warm flesh pressed
into thick colorless crystal,
a whirl of frozen waters,
piling the ground until
our simplest movements grow
slowed, painful,

and our voices rise.

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