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Lesser season

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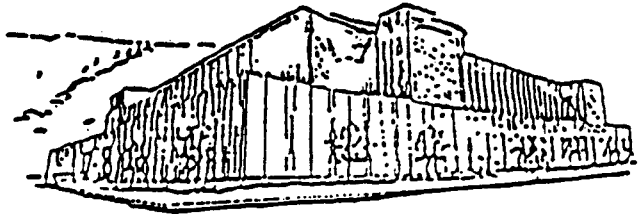
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Lesser Season

by

Nils Michals

B.A. University of California, Santa Cruz, 1996

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

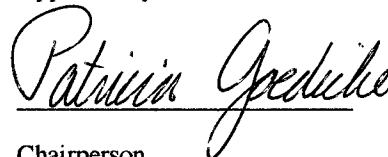
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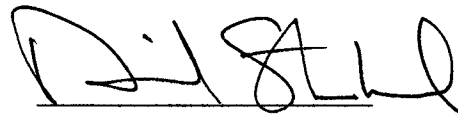
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News of the Blazing World Gone Down

--On Sunday, August 10, 1628, the Vasa, the largest warship of its time, went down on its maiden sail, never having left the Stockholm harbor. The ship was salvaged in its near entirety in the 1960's, having been unusually preserved by brackish harbor water, and now rests in a Stockholm museum as the world's only 17th century warship on display.

Unlike other books, this always opens
to the same page: shy-grown citizens,
a breeze, city of harbors.
The ship is always a messenger:
dogs look up from their feast,
shifty eyes, pickpockets soften,
the queen is more royally-boned
than ever as it sails by the old town square
where the scent of herring remains
after the barrels are gone. The heretics
are axed. Blood of food and man
rivulet in the cobble.
Even the sailor who works
each nook of wood
for that implicit leap of sudden light --
his eyes must pass on to other eyes
until a wing spans between
though sometimes he is mistaken
and a light breeze undoes a hull to the sky.

Everything fails.
In her mausoleum we can touch her,
ship built helplessly as our bodies,
too thin for the weight of our ferocity,
too thin for our flourishing signature,
the book opening to the same page.
Someone has always already seen the King,
mother soothing the foal,
a boy who hammers clean one nail.
And the meek one who holds out an arm
as she is thrashed for the wrong spoon.
The peacock drowns in the blue

which makes it brilliant.
From broken boxes, iron shot rolls,
the hull pitches, windless parachutes
touch against the dusky decks
of gold and wood which flood to black.
Some have always imagined,
dreamt themselves canopies of sail
falling darkly through deeper waters.

Revolving Around Tycho Brahe: Wenceslas Square

Waking, a woman who ate a boiled egg
in bed last night sees the snow whitening

the red slopes of churches, and once in the mirror,
thinks she has been sleepwalking in the square,

removes a flake of eggshell from her hair.
The astronomical clock sputters its wood birds

to life, the metro opens its bright slant
down to the trains. Hawkers unlock

their chests of flashy jewels, rock foot to foot
in the cold, faces buried in steaming wine.

Swaddled in blankets, a baby
is just its face, pale and moonish.

Umbrellas, like bright aimless pinwheels,
drift in the passing carriages,

horse musk, white clouds pluming
from nostrils like twin nebulas,

cold gas and dust, mere ingredients.
Few remember where on the bridge

a man set fire to himself in '68,
sat still as one in the row of black saints

petrified on the bridge, and burned,
smoking like damp wood, a grey root in the sky.

Now, the prostitutes wander home,
their lioness moves, night coos

silent, breath like empty champagne flutes.
The hawks hover their fakes like moody, bearded planets,

as the cobble under snow blooms in liverish spots.
The baby is too old for itself.

No magnesium flash, no alchemy,
everywhere a universe eaten by wind,

nothing here center to its dying.
Did Brahe burn...like the man, quieter than his flames?

Did he dream of his missing nose,
daydream the lover breaking his red seal

on the envelope, bond white, corners crisp,
full of bees that died stinging the dark?

Snow cannot settle on the Tyn church
twin spires, dark extensions of a center

where he is buried in the church floor,
the square spinning around him,

full of those who find the earth too vast
to be anything but the heavens vanished.

Whether earth or sun, sun or earth,
somewhere a body nears the end

of its one revolution
as night's thin shell of snow vanishes,

as the woman removes with difficulty
the pearled slivers from her hair.

Death In the Lesser Season

Someone's old tug, the Sea Bull,
falls locked in ice, its smoke red
weathered, drained pink by the stilled river.
Four p.m. moon rise, a man hovers,
a lunar eclipse over his ice hole.
Attentive to trout organs, the delicate
soft-colored globes, he tosses back everything
except the bladders, which float.
In a year of imperceptible moves,
the man mistakes them for silence.
The static of ice alive,
tinny snaps, a crush of foil
deep in a far hull of his ear,
the ribbed hull of the Sea Bull
buckles as it sleeps.

The drowsy riverpeople point and laugh,
careful not to hear --
someone will pay in Spring they say.
Mountains hunker under their bluish fur,
light is bound in ice.
Hours of snow return simply, invisibly
appear and fall, how the airless
air takes without us.
We see the slow plan move tonnage,
winter, from above the ice breaks
on the delta like a fanning stream
of glossy buckshot,
pitches and loosens as bergs,
white bronchial blooms on the sea.

The tug spills its pink wood, a wound
the ice cannot close.
Trout stack like silver kindling.
The ballast has caved, the tug

dying, the ice is dying,
the town dogs bound for a silent frequency,
something to which the deep ear perks.
When the man retrieves the bladders
little rose mouths stain the ice.
The line tenses, parts the slack water
as unnumbered trout knock from below,
remember their lives seconds later,
again rap wild against their sky of ice.

A Room With A Violence

Is there a way other than
by door, window? The webs
of copper plumbing, the corrugated flue
in through cables slapping at the flat,
another way in the late
afternoon honking and foghorns,
muted vowels of sirens, alarmed cars.
On every surface the ash of tv light.
Lullabye of pills as they drift
further into cushions. Poodle hair
falls to china, stereo glass, into sectioned
light slanting through the birdcage.
The gold boned cage abandoned of the parakeet,
slicker yellow, dark crosshatchings--
its once constant flicker perch to perch
made the room more windless
on windy days.
The past is perches flickering,
stringlet of red pearls rising on the skin,
as from a ragged blade in a weak blue fist.
What are walls but the cut,
and form is the world pushing back
at us. The room drags its rusted wings
through ghosts of dust, crisp stars,
picking up the infamous light
of aviaries, the dusty tinder in nebulas.
Is flickering. Sibilant wind
through the cracks in the casings.
Stray dried berry like a birdheart.
The cage is a bronzed torso, kicking invisibly.
There is a thin shadowpole. Leaning is the cane
tipped in red. It says
caution, everyone caution
in a bright voice, a theatrical light.
It frames the blinds from behind,

the lock loops undone, in a square kitchen window
the irises' placid stun--
the thoughtful little wing of yellow,
a thimbleful of ancient, unceilinged sea,
scraps of sapphire lit from without.

After Surgery

Cloudbreak, the window cool with lake air,
discrepancies in glass
where the sun breaks into streaking pearl,
lush passes of shade,
the shamrocks, insistent for glass,
craning for a small plain of light.
By evening I think I hear
the little closings of their three wings,
of fog simply replacing air.
Evening, hear the boats nudge
in the docks like stabled animals,
hear a pool of water where thousands
of stamp-size maple leaves
form, scatter, and form again:
star, flake, handprint.

What comes back is
the open gown breezy through rooms,
prep rooms wide and low with worry,
scattered, dissimilar hands fluttering
like small, self-involved birds,
mouthless mint green faces,
the lidocaine working with intelligence,
Above the I.V. drip the light,
every silver instrument lifted shadowless
from its groove, the growing
alone beneath the mask,
anesthesia, my involuntary lyric --

Evening disintegrates in frames
arrested, a red chariot that unpins
helplessly outside itself,
the wheel a windmilling O
with its own mind for glory.
Some flawless arrangement seems at the point of glass.

Someone walks light-heeled up the path,
reconsiders.

Darkness drops clickless over the lake,
a light patter of fog dripping
from lake pines on the skylight --
what happens to the man
who remembers the outlines of boats
in fog, then only fog--

Fandango

Patricia brought him out on the red deck
for me to watch him in the sea air
and sun of the lawn where other birds
rode at the level of insects, tracing
and retracing invisible flight paths.
Fandango stood stock still, a sheen
directing off his black wings folded under himself,
and soon breathed by the stroke
of Patricia's fingers, long turned white
beneath the bedsheets in the sick bay.
Fandango's eyes were unearthly, not at all
the severe eyes that size and lock
in most birds of prey, but either
simple and wide, like panoramas,
or vacant, the eye opening in to row
after row of leafless, unbirded trees.
Patricia began her easy talk again
only now of Fandango's sickness,
that there were times he must have believed
himself his potent double
to stride right up to dogs in the neighborhood.
Given a morning to think she said
Fandango seemed to piece together
the blueprint of his own wing.
It was her own kind of ache to watch
his wings spin in discord to the grass,
then to beat amazed in a circle, or not at all,
to stand and wait as though air and wing
were unreachable halves of thought.
Here Patricia paused for a slice of orange,
raised then pressed an infirm finger
to her temple. The gracious laugh
of phoebes filled the yard in place
of Patricia's words, and even while
I longed, now more so, to touch

his chiffon head feathers, his red fanned tail,
Fandango seemed entranced
with an invisible pole running
through the center of himself,
a double tension, as in sickness,
what a long drink of sickness really is--
a rising and setting of body and body,
a mock moon, one never entirely willing
to abandon the belief that if needed,
in a terrible crack, the body could fly.

Father: the Architect

An untended garden, the sea air
eating the belly of the old Volvo,
the same line of quiet ants that return
newly drawn each day... a fresh,
pencil line on the washed concrete.
And now the ants wild before the storm,
each singular in its furious, private purpose.
Earlier, down at the beach at mid-day,
when his boy snared headlong the frisbee,
snared his toss from its invisible string,
wave under its final weight,
wave, boy, disc crashing into disappearance,
when the boy, before the, just as the --
when the boy rose in hand out of the foam.
He smiled, his arm fixed at the point of release,
body twisted open, a man holding nothing.
But now in the garden with the scissor blade
calm at his side, squash like globes of fire
about his feet. But now.
The sea faints blue,
a sea-tang escapes from the polyps
heated on the shore, the phoebes fall
like day bats, wild for evening insects.
A bloom for the sick who, like a deaf person,
blooms within the head, within a shell,
hears the one roar of dogs barking at storm surf.
Nothing keeps its fire--
the blade, the squash,
air of drawn-curtained sickness--
what can take form in an abyss?

Heat lightning
all night like unanticipated answers.
The squash flower is unforgiving,
a pale, yellow flesh in his hand.

He rises, his step calm through the part
of the house where her shaded room
listens with all its air for his footfall,
the hardwood popping beneath
his live, heavy weight.

Mercury

To think on these last ten days boxing our lives, or the short ten years here is work among the empty rooms and evening blooming through the electricity-less house. As night descends I cannot remember the constant impermanence that surrounded this place: the usual confetti of light off the shifty table of the sea, the glass walls and tables of the house spitting in prisms, every item brass and silver polished to a bodiless arc. A wilderness of color. Rather, I seem not to have been here at all, but to have stolen another's memory or bizarre dream of mirrors, another's silver and dentless poem. What slips away hidden in what is known as hidden? I pick out a glass vial among clutter in my father's shoebox, carefully, as a child picks out a known voice from among many: inside an ounce of quicksilver, fourteen times heavier than water, swallows its own size over and again as I tilt the glass. I remember that stone, iron and lead float on the surface of mercury, that it's poisonous but compounded may cure syphilis.

Have I rushed out to meet myself, as a family rushes out when the familiar car pulls in, and the stopped engine begins to tick? The scuff marks from years of furniture in the hardwood say I have been here. Still, in these calendar-less, curtain-less rooms, the moon winding its silver tail around itself, this house loses all form. The urge of all color to silver, impermanent, eely silver. I think that if I were a thief I would study this boyish symmetry: quick and seemingly indifferent, formal grey and yet burnished, bulbous, unrhymed yet metronomical. If I were to thief I'd be so silver all color would blush unmistakably as I approached, and all the wild colors: scarlet, emerald, cobalt, lime, even black and white would desire themselves me, and my trick hand would flash inside the everyday one, and they would forget themselves in me.

Fierce With the Idea of Beauty at a Demolition Derby

Four fifty fours line the Start Pit.
From the Chevys, Fords and Pontiacs
a distinct heat, as from enormous males
priming to square off.
Cans of beer open in packaged hushes
between the pop-pop of engines.
The V-eights skim in their steel boxes--
there are hearts running above ground,
the grandstand whooshed silent,
intimate as paper figures.
A history of ourselves might depend on a pose,
countless plinkings, tiny moves.

The green light flicks on and the wild lungs
of Monte Carlos and Impalas roar slowly open.
Radiators blow, the square fist
of back ends buckle, whump of metal.
33 cannot restart.
13 rages with the brilliance
of a father on a twelve pack.
37 and 22 stumble
over their steel locked like bucks.
Every dent, every tick, inexact concave in the gloss--
a smooth beauty splits new awe,
smashes along hoods and sidewalls,
hammerings in paper gold.
The stadium light blinks chrome in Pleiadic chains,
the entire field of mud and clods
a shine-capped sea of misshapen metal,
3 catches an unbroken gas stream from its V-eight--
that chance to live too vigorous
and dumb to unemblazon ourselves is lost.
Great necked men nod and rise,
the lily-boned zip their coats high,
the heaps steam, smoke red

where tow truck lights
cast their imaginary emergencies.

Swimming With Father

Beneath the surface, the mute boom
of him sharpens in the zagging light
and warble of the fifty meter lane.
His stroke eases into unconcern, clockwork.
His grey hair whitens, calves, thighs
line into a united muscle
as he forgets himself, no sick
wife tended at the end of his curving wrist,
just the resonant patter of each palm
entering water, his great tan body
in pendulous swing,
arcing past the woman whose legs
daze away below,
the point of water lost upon her.

For a thousand yards side by side
we glide in this calm lilt,
trickery of water and light slowed,
eyes saucerish and diaphanous
as an unanticipated question.
My shadow, perfect-edged, follows his
over the pool floor tiles,
the distance wall to wall unfolding
with such imagined clarity
it spans Time.
After our kickturns unball we spring
simultaneously off the wall into underwater flight,
our bodies singular as still,
contained arrows, one slightly smaller,
less rounded, more conscious of poise.

In the last thousand yards he pulls away
in the distance inside his own white trail,
as some massive mammal leaves
to sharpen into a later age,

to search an old wound his brood
might one day understand. Direction
is like that, like water
clearer than the eye can process,
an arriving by feel alone,
as a lion in a land strange
to him pauses for the scent
that a blink earlier bristled
his mane. Pauses eerily
provident, knowing a drink pool waits
unwatched, unrippled in the next clearing.

Ruby

He reaches for a grapefruit
from the refrigerator crisper,
weighs the fruit in his palm
as he did at market: firm
with a thin peel, moon of pink light.
He searches out the fruit knife,
its body long and wanting,
speaking *separation*, as if to thirst
the end to whim, invention.
Carving free the peel, he leaves
no rind, just veined crimson:
a dark heart remains.

Heart. Ticker pump.
Tenterhooked red trumpet.
The extracted heart of a snapper turtle
may beat a day later
unrhymeably on the white counter,
plowing on silent, even
impossibly if able.
Secretariat's heart
was two and a half times
the normal of a racehorse,
and as he lay dying two hands
were needed to hold that muscle,
its fever unblushing to grey,
rose petals heated in water.

She sleeps in the cool
part of the house, there,
a trunked darkness,
magnolia browning in a dish
bedside, a fan thrumming
back and forth its days across the room.
At eight pm the mosquitoes come alive

over the rose bush, the distant whitecaps
feign dolorous bells.

To deceive, restlessly, the sick,
as does the heart, its chambers still.

Be still and work as not to wake.

Be still the work to trick the brain.

The Ambulance Came & We Know How That Goes

The family waits in that early calm
when other people seem to know
what they are doing: short-tie
cops rifle through files,
a room is dismantled, a drifter
questioned. Everyone who knows
waits on the work of meticulous instruments:
a stray dark strand, an unbottled pill,
an errant print lifted.

Though the coroner's report flounders,
the coroner reaches into the dim of us
with a handful of light.

No one else will touch us--
how long had morphine to wind
the blue lattice within her,
who is this Buzz character,
what was her last word?

The caution tape ribbons in the bay gusts,
will not settle on the bannister clouded white,
the row of prints delicate as sea fossils,
the call button, the mail slot,
the worn knob on the black gate.

He might have touched these places,
there is no where we may touch--

Outside the SFPD the family stands
sheepishly, waiting with expressions
as in those old photographs
where a tweaked light
and a wonder for technology
held even the rageful to their pose.

The fine, unaccountable edges
of silver tools, seen-this-before
detectives, cop-show endings--
motion, drama, color
follow a death of its own,

untouchably skimming
far above our bare gladiola spikes,
scarlet as sirens,
each immaculate, appropriate,
sleepless, alive.

Lesser Season

As they pass, de-icers, their desperate inertia.
Frantic as the freshly blind,
touching every surface,
red lights against the falling snow.
This country is full of gravel salts,
lit wooden stars. Stale dynasties
full of globes of blown glass,
through the center of each a glass
thread, which if heard might sound
as a distant summer:
pine bat to ball,
hammer to lake dock. The glass
has long galloped from the blower's breath,
now cool, a visible trace
to be held in the cathedral
the hands can form. No longer
a moving wound, the country
loves the snow hours,
scrollwork along bicycle frames, empty laundry lines.
Snow laces the rake teeth,
only the smoking mouths of flues untouched.
Why should we hear beyond the window?
The snow, the snow,
its layers deafening, outlining the pines--
radiant shirtwaists we may not touch.

In the Event of a Moon Disaster

The stream of radio out of Houston
was to cut, and short-sleeved men
left to stand around or stare
into the whirl and click of data.
By Nixon's order, strand the astronauts,
leave each to replay his accident,
the electrical horror, the dawning
of that slow count out of breath
within the helmet's clear planet.
Somewhere in a northern town in Sweden
my mother says yes
in a long blink longer than needed,
the room grey-blue, bare-lined:
a single mattress,
a ping pong table, two birch chairs.
She warms easily to the oboe curve
of my father's tones as they sink
just out of reach, as a lullabye does,
while the park swans dull
under a fresh falling snow.
Those last cool hours:
radio line empty, space unhousing
beyond the soundless miles of moon,
the play and rewind of wives
as they are notified. All of them
low on oxygen, the line cut,
hurtling toward something brilliant, strangled.

In the bare space of that room
his easy buck straight into her,
her hands in his curly shock of hair,
my father and mother expanding
into versions larger than themselves, rising
over the lunar ping pong table.
A little gravity, the astronaut

one sixth of himself,
and like the astronaut, the child
needing such little flesh to sing.

One
light
jump,

the big live blue Earth
sailing through a last window.

Reading to Me, Age 7

Rough and sweet as musk,
the scent of your loosened tie
filled the big chair as you read
again "The Singing Bone,"
the story of the artless young brother
struck in the tavern, drowned in river gravel.
The town believed him missing,
they believed the old brother slew
the wild boar, and years slid out the valley;
the land dimmed, then lightened.
One day a herdsman found a thighbone
sanded clean to a platinum white
by the river beneath the bridge.
A hornpiece, he thought, if chambered.
But just then the bone sang!
And it was the brother,
the strangled poor brother in the bone.
The bone sang too in the King's hand
the story of himself choked
for the boar for the princess
and the King remembered, illuminating
the map of the kingdom in his head.
And as King will do,
the reenactment of the crime was punishment,
the old brother strangled and bagged
with rocks to die in a burlap sack,
drowned in the river.
You were a cry of loons,
and I, in your lap in the big chair
watched, your eyes half following
the light around the words,
half the light around mother
flitting in and out of rooms.
How your eyes shone; if needed,
a lantern vaulting forward in the dark.

Keepsake

“There are all kinds of problems. I was reading about this physicist who has spent his life adding up the universe, every time missing some essential weight. And there’s the problem of these little particles called neutrinos. They blow out into the universe during solar flares and supernovas, and just keep going, flying through space unchanged, invisible, unconcerned. Right through the center of Earth. This guy built a hundred thousand gallon tank a mile underground, filled it with dry cleaning fluid. Dad? Dad...you listening?” You weren’t, and I sensed a heat radiating out through the white sheets, the heat of surgery cooling. The controlled panic the body commands in red, dire moments, exited slowly. The sutures were still warm: one deep in the blind gut, the cecum, which would heal with vanishing stitches, and the other, a raised cut along the abdomen where your skin displayed the pale orange scrub of trauma. With all the stitching and antibiotic gel, the incision looked like a long line of black ants sprayed dead in mid-work on linoleum. You motioned me close, and the face so often knitting some elaborate trick, pained with gravity. Near the scruff of your beard a trace of sweet percaset escaped with your breath. I thought you might ask me something about neutrinos. Or quarks. That we humans had found the House of God, and named it ‘quark.’

“Pancreas,” you whispered hoarsely. “No, appendix,” I said, “they took it out of you.” Then slowly, as if some layer of ice in your voice had begun to thaw, “Where is it? I want it.” “Dad, it’s extra, like the part you never read at the end of a book.” “Jung?” “Sure,” I replied, “I don’t think anyone ever reads the appendix to Jung...even you.” In and out of a Lortab vacuum, you drifted off, and I looked around, amazed. We had been in the kind of conversation where two people miss the passing of delicate gradiants of shade; we hadn’t thought to light the room. The early moonlight snuck by an opening in the brocade curtains. All of the silver objects in the room’s right side were winking: a spot three quarters up the length of the catheter pole, a luminescent drag along the curve of a steel tray, nicks in the aluminum tissue dispenser, a polished screw. We had fired the baseball around the quiet cul-de-sac until this point of evening arrived, the eastern side all lit up. Thrown firm, the ball could close or open the air behind it, making the sound of a zipper head zinging back and forth between us. Each night I retraced the red stitching, memorized the baseball until it was neither weightful nor weightless, but simply its own weight, an understanding the hand reaches as the leather leaves the last finger. All the weight in this room seemed calculated, accounted, for us to see in the shapes of things, in the names our bodies had become: father, son. Even the air felt as though there were plenty of time, that it could deceive us both later. But what if the calculation fell just short? That one item we couldn’t anticipate sent us scrambling. I thought of your appendix, a burst cuff of flesh, tossed out with other triangles of skin, thimble shapes of fat.

I thought you asleep but caught your face quizzing, like a boy first learning that math is a problem. “I don’t care if it’s useless. It’s me. I want it...I could put it in a jar on my desk...next to Jung.” We must have had the same image...some snip of flesh, ghostly with its own light, an otherwordly fish, beacon growing out

its forehead, drifting aimlessly round and around in formaldehyde, a supernatural flutter within the jar...because we started to laugh, harder to a low shake, then a soundless laughter trying not to laugh, crying, wounds flinching, your sides literally about to burst. "Stop...stop," you pleaded.

Visiting hours were over. I got up and walked to the door. "See you tomorrow," I said. "I think they put my intestines in backward." "You're fine, dad." I opened the door and a column of light rectangled across the room, splitting your bed in half. The room's objects jumped to shape, burst in their places, as though each item wore its blueprint on the outside. The shadows of dahlias like dark explosions threw themselves to the wall. Peeking beneath a hospital gown, the yellow gloss of a National Geographic corner shone. "Why dry cleaning fluid?" you asked. "Cheap...contains chlorine. When a neutrino passes through chlorine, it makes Argon 37, and nothing else makes Argon 37 a mile down into the Earth. No one has ever seen a neutrino...they only let us see where one has been." You turned the word over on your tongue, "N e u t r i n o...what does it mean?" "Little neutral ones," I said, "some believe they make up the hidden weight."

Christmas Eve

The glasses, dishes and plates seem to sink
into their privacy, the dinner tunes
and talk close around us. Our cake forks tink
against china, the cloth stains in brown moons
from the coffee spoons. Sister tells a true
story about you: harmless. Our laugh buoys
the air, but you believe we laugh at you.
We seem to see an old pain, the shy boy
shamed in school, rise in the glass of your eyes
and go sweet to cruel, like fools in Shakespeare.
You bow your head, your hand falls from your thigh,
then you rise, spark and catch flame, bring your fear
down in a fist to the table. SHUT UP you yell
and sound halts save the shaking crystal: icy bells.

Sis

Blonde hair bunched
 straight up in a pig's tail,
 little Genghis Khan
on your pink bicycle,
 basket of plastic daisies--
 round and round
the cul-de-sac.

 One small juniper
 in each new yard.

New houses
 in the dairy flats,
 squares of fresh sidewalk.

Up and down the sidewalks
 you push the family cat,
 Sally,

in the doll stroller--
 Sally in bonnet, diaper,
 baby pajamas.

NO!

BAD CAT SALLY!

 until she stays,
no longer the hunting
 grey ribbon in night
 dragging in rabbits
by the neck,
 but a puppeted
 doll of fur
any cat
 would rather skin itself
 before becoming.

You run out of doors
 naked from the bath
 while I play baseball with the boys,
your shrill laugh

as though a piglet's
let go in a field.

The boys yuck and stammer
and I,
embarrassed,
scoop you home,
your peach skin clean
against my smoky shirt,
those imperishable
summer fires falling.
Again and again it happens,
I say to the boys
*You don't understand,
my mom's Swedish,
naked kids are nothing,
the whole country runs naked.*

Just before dark
Sally can't shake the diaper
along the fence rail.

You nakedly ride,
a half-crushed oreo
in your fist.

Clockwise round
you draw with your wheels
one more circle
inside the cul-de-sac.

Dad's headlights snake through
the rows of houses,
the car seeming to bring
the last warm pocket of dusk.
He steps out,
tie loosened,
faint smell of books
and deodorant,
hair fired back.

Go the other way!

he shouts out.

What? you reply,

always leaning right

in your right turning circle.

The other way! he says.

I Can't! you yell.

Dad looks at me,

shrugs,

half laughs to himself.

She can't go the other way

he says

and walks in the house.

The Genealogist's Daughter

Somewhere is the moment sworn to paper,
the birth, the death, the signed vow
spanning the irretrievable life,
that life fast awakening in the life

of the finder, and this search a small act,
as yes or no, simple as the name
gliding its flourish beyond the X.

As one silently delighted
by the sanctity of detail,
she hesitates on the lid of archives,

knowing that, of acts, the small most betray;
a paperless deed can unman the dead,
an oath unswearing itself in one
unknown susurrations, not unlike

the soft boom of his casket
now returning, and will her hand close on it,
will her fine proof swear now anew
and cast the light from the unfinished tree?

Unmannable Blue

Somewhere on automatic in the last belt of blue
an unmarked tomb jets in toneless irony.
Flamboyant golfer, crew likely dead, or perhaps
in the making of a sleep which abides
above South Dakota, radio sky empty.

Worse, your sentient, round-eyed voice
follows every sky kite and tail.
You walk the circle inside the planned gates,
or drive your full dull weight affixed to the boaty accelerator.
Even the woman who eats alone
has become a shape in herself:
table, plate, mush,
silhouette in window.

Few fathom the chance to bypass the Earth,
or for that matter, anything done near quiet.

Where is my dead one? you ask,
Here and *here* points my father to soil.
Dig her up he says, uninflected, unblinking,
knowing you mean some folly
sweet or cruel, an ingenious curse,
kiss reminiscent of the world, the child
that opalesces as winter sky over valley,
no tenderness for a blade --
an untouchable descent where the dead travel
as long as they can of their own accord.

Letter to Ashley from Missoula

Dear George: I try to think of you in perfect form. Short reels of film really. When you stuffed Parker, junior year. So agile he was, those soft pro hands seemingly too large for their speed, the pass into the key where he squared his 6'7 all-state frame, squared as if alone in wing after wing of parquet gymnasiums. How your wound body exploded from a corner, your calves trained by the rage of Plyometrics, sprinting with bricks. I remember Parker's dying swan follow-through, your right arm extending, simply reaching, as if to touch with curiosity, your fingers timing the ball at its apex, then the muscled thrust of the ball down to wood. These letters I've been reading tell me we've nothing to expect as we grow older, that there may be no known such thing as "beauty." Poet named Dick Hugo, wrote about train station towns, radiant cutthroats in a part of the river one would never suspect. Not sure I believe him, but I like his frank manner, his law of ordinary spirits. Most often I reverse that tape of memory, those few seconds so that the ball rises under your hands like a levitation trick. At that point your hands can do anything, split the air like a fresh, dividing pack of cards. Parker's swan sucks back into his hands, and you slowly return to earth to the moment before you break into bird. Then its just the ball moving in the air of the lane, then the lane air in any empty gym. You see, this search for perfect forms: blown glass, pears, the hollow curve above a woman's hip, can be ceaseless and embarrassing as failing at whiskey. Whether its law or poetry. Just once I'd like a poem of mine to go like that-- one that plays itself forward and reverse, looks at its own moments twice and stops at a point that is nothing but its own awe, the form we build toward and back away from. Hugo wrote these letters when he knew he was dying, but didn't tell anyone. I bought the plane tickets for your wedding today. Can't wait to see Burgos again, that ten-century cathedral. I can't forget the puppet high in the rafters, the flycatcher, who apes the gape of his spectators below. And every Christ in America

seems unimaginative when compared to the one in Burgos:
human hair, stretched hide for skin, and the ostrich eggs,
smooth and gawking, laid at his feet.

I can't believe those Spaniards get drunk and piss
on the Cathedral walls, and I'm thinking that maybe
one of those two ton gargoyles that occasionally fall
will get intelligent, find its time and mark.

Anyway, as I'm not dying, and as your Spanish mother-in-law
told me I must be lucky with love because I was no good at cards,
that cathedral is one place I won't be pissing near anytime soon.

How is Isabelle? Give her my regards. Just think,
you get to spend the rest of your life rolling around
in all that olive skin and raven black hair.

You dog.

Nils

Lives of the Dead

--After Jane Hirschfield's "The Lives of the Heart"

Are mineral, faunal, earthen.
Wear glassy, shiv-point feathers,
blue runnels of strung iris tongue.
Wear live coral, hummingbird lungs.
Are granite; are air; are ice; split pearl.
May be smoked for myrrh, for lavender,
guttled for clover, for sapphires.
Hide shadow or light;
glide; stumble; murmur psalms
to vigilant swans, mute witnesses.
Are salt, are snow;
step light-heeled beneath maples.
Cling to keyhole light.
Rise up as sawtooth weather,
burnt sea fire, bioluminescent and haloed.
Leave the strange perfection of bodies
suspended in amber. May be grieved, may be missed,
may be lifted, forgotten, sung.
Lie dormant until they are opened by ice,
by spring. Leap invisibly, leap wild
in the bowing quiet of their funerals.
Are willful, are lazy, mischevious, batty, sweet.
Are helpless in ash-fall, in glittery urns,
are careless, are mindful, are hot-blooded,
are pink flecks in the powdery eyes of albino deer.
Wander gullwinged and hollow the bamboo groves.
Wander the fields of shot fowl, curious
for the red-starred love-lies-bleeding.
Wander the silent polyphonies of skies,
the animal-headed clouds.
Not one is not borne by the others.
Not one is not made to grieve in a half-world.
Not one does not speak.
Each of them appears and vanishes at latchless gates,

as hair unpins -- fierce, merciful
while standing at the crossroads,
a sweet-nothing smoking fragrant behind the ear.

Lesser Season

Someone stonewatches, can't stamp out
the cold, blows a furnace
into balled hands as the ice storm
slicks the town. The lines are down,
the light rail paralyzed.
Have I looked too much
or hard? Some damage to the hills,
uncroppable fields.

Close up, eyes leap out of fur-lined hoods,
dusty green or blue,
at times opening in to shy wilderness.
The man with whey-colored hair
leaning with all his weight on the cane--
looking, relearning.
Not your box-blind, sea-cloud gaze,
the ferocity with which you examined
a locket, or a box so finely wrought
it might hold buttons for a doll--
unapologetic hands,
the box an inch from your face
as if to hear the engraver's work--

At first light, empty, astral plains.
Things ice needled, prised from a distance.
Even the thinnest ends of the birch stems
gloved in ice, flagpole ropes
englassed, dangerous cable,
a willow chandeliered.
A boy checks the farm well for a slipped trophy buck,
and almost drifts in himself. Nothing down there
but a glossy throat.
How may I even touch my disservice to air,
that indecipherable static--

The entire arctic in sway
to air alive against the walls.

Three Ways to Grieve

I. Reception

Look at the white pole of light,
the path it strikes: a lobe, a shoulder
of black mohair, the bow leaning
on the leaning cello.
Without a priest to help us dismantle a parable,
lower a body into the earth,
there is nowhere to pinpoint sadness,
and anything may do: an unpatterned eruption of sighs,
the broken bird of the wrist as we cradle
the undersides of wine glasses, poles of light.
Someone recounts the fable of the heron and hunter --
no one can place the story
but everyone remembers when the hunter
glides his caress along the heron, a scene
the Old World might have stamped into a sheet of gold.
Someone coughs, a voice breaks,
odd dents we can't help but to bang
by accident into the air.
Silver pins, each through a browning white rose,
its green stem, a patch of black fabric,
glitter breast-high through the room.
Who are we in this?
Perhaps grief begins us.
A whisper as though we've discovered
a pearl in our mouths, a little scene
where the heron is charmed,
abandoning any last clarity of itself,
and sinking in the arms of the hunter
like a splendid white question mark.

II. Burial Procession

In truth the heron will sense

a graceful harm over its life
and lift in one elegant vault.
Waiting for the body to lower,
the family stares at the priest,
into the sea of pressed black clothes.
Everyone dotted with a new white rose,
edges critically crisp, spiralling in
with a furious architecture.
So apparently simple,
like flight or swimming through cloudless water,
movement we no longer question:
are we sure this is happening like this?
Still, the family waits,
there is something else entirely --
a bird, a rustle,
the entire flock startled,
each heron shaping into its slicked wing,
hitting the roofless blue.

III. Eulogy

There were no herons and certainly no bird
thinking itself a violent treasure of the sky.
The family grieved itself, a monument
no one visits, and even-pewed spaces

opened between acquaintances,
the body, the priest.
A poem, stories were read.
A delicately dressed man delivered the eulogy.

Perhaps we more often inclined
our heads to smell our roses --
to stay still, the memory
like a finger crowding,

pressing into the breastbone.

Every gesture a match strike
to caution against, this is not us,
we said, not us at all.

For once the empty sky
held its slant, and eyes closed
on imprinted boxes of light,
the outline of good deeds in the stained glass

retreating so slow and plain
we saw how to get older.

Stay still. Who will visit?
Who will come and touch
when the heron is gone? What will pluck us
out of this life?

The Puppet Shop

Row on row of rattlebrain stares,
a suspended sea of shoplocked faces:
King, witch, doctor.
Fresh balsa shavings,
blond sweet-odored half moons
litter the floor, and above,
strings lift like sticks of light
reluctantly into the rafter's darkness.
Every figure is a reason for caution:
tiny, fanciful brush strokes,
book-mark thin wooden faces,
digits as delicate as a newborn's.
The aproned shopkeeper gestures,
Would I like to see one?
The doctor's white smock
is silken, spun with luminescence,
just the kind of object
often discovered as it escapes--
a stitched red cross pulses in the center.

A nonce Czech word, a mistaken cobbled alley,
statues dusted with soot,
each clutching one final gold item
from some raging, infectious travesty.
Only the spires of this city lift
clean to the sky, black lances
plunging from the static clouds.
Whose hands are these, waiting
for the invisible string? Whose face?
The marionettes clack like mad Pinocchios
when the door opens and another
fascinated one steps in from the wind.
Box the doctor please I say
as I make a shape in the air with my hands--
I might rescue one face out of limbo,

the doctor's carved, delicately
startled response,
as if his hands close against his will
the eyes of one unexpectedly taken--
your death, endless,
each face a smaller
more perfect doll inside a doll.

The Artist By the Hair, Kicking and Screaming

A hyacinth blooms with a single blue madness,
Cezanne blooms into madness,
lead in the oils.
Someone is resplendant
under the alternate fire of stagelights,
someone boasts in plain red ink:
I can paint you on a postage stamp.
Between the city and the exile
each sand grain under the sun
reflects a lake, tame and bright when still.
Oarfish the size of slender canoes
go lives unseen. Flocks of jumbo albatross
lost until spring. Someone lowers
into the blue parabola of another's hips.
Some are reminiscent of cathedral scents,
sweet must, as they plant a forearm
over a bowl of ruby tomatoes,
not yet knowing they can no longer feign
drinkholes for eyes,
the wobbly knees of fawnhood.
And someone is a monument to flame.
At first light: a slowed wing
genuflects in backflight, traces of a pulse
dragged then taken to flight.

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