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This collection of poems maps the landscape of loss and love, and centers itself in the overlap of passion and grief.

NOT THE KIND THAT MEANS SPLENDOR

by

Abigail Lee

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Approved by

Committee Chair

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for Helen

There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon,
and another glory of the stars; for star differs from star in glory.
So it is with the resurrection of the dead.

-1 Corinthians 15:41-42a

APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis written by Abigail Lee has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Committee Chair _____

Committee Members _____

Date of Acceptance by Committee

Date of Final Oral Examination

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Blue can be a place/ please can it be a place

when you die I will embroider you
stitch leaves of blue through the thin skin

over your eyes bead your tongue with bits of glass

not so simple as *feathered with stone*

mother if I could unbutton your chest

fill it with things the opposite of light

a cutwork cloister where stitches chain & do not unravel into lack

can I be wearing your shirt & across
mountains knowing that soon I will be hurtling
gently toward you & both of us still in love with your breath & I do not yet

know about the graveyard of words where I can go to mouth
the bone of your name & I have not yet
gnawed it into that small shape

have not yet done the worst thing
which was to leave you alone

CHAPTER I

Origins

I grew up in the South not quite white.
Sometimes I'm asked *What are you?*
before I'm asked my name.
When my mother strollered us to the park
the other women would ask *Are you their nanny?*
as little bodies swung from monkey bars
and the small girls in frilly white socks
played the game where one is the mom,
awkwardly rocking another girl her size in her arms,
one is the daddy going to work, collecting acorns, building a house
by drawing walls in the sand. One is the maid
who ties her sweater around her waist like an apron
and tidies up the house, using a broken
pine branch like a broom.

My mother was nine the year
that sex across race lines became legal
in Virginia. When it became legal to make me.
She had no idea she'd fall
in love with a Korean man.
She was young. She put her long
blonde hair between two towels on the board
and switched the iron on, spitting on it
to see if it was hot enough. Wanting that stick
straight look. Burning her fingers
almost every time.

The edge of Death Valley

We chose it because of the showers—
hadn't bathed since Albuquerque.
Days of desert road, sleeping sacked against
each other in a tent like a tin can.
Your red hair was crunchy. Mine shone, dark
and oil-slick. Set next to the rv park
was a squarecut pool fed by white pvc
from a hot spring—a single bright artery snaking off
over the hill, brown and cactus-pocked—
pickleweed branching like dry coral over the pool,
mineral and utterly clear. We slipped under
the water to escape the gnats, eyes open,
watching ourselves wave arms to stay sunk.
The salt flats wait a few miles away.
Tomorrow we will find the bushes rusted
with salt like rock candy on a simple stick.
Then we will let the heat shimmer our world awake—
asphalt searing the soles of our boots.
Tomorrow we will ration what we desire,
lifting our reservoir to weigh its quench,
wondering if we could drink the water from the car's radiator.
Tomorrow I will not cry as I fall asleep
for the first time since my mother died.
We are sinking in water as warm as our hands,
as if our touch had heated it.

Self portrait as two-headed woman

She spends most of the day singing herself to sleep—
her lips brushing her ear lightly,
 dark hair sighing on breath,
hazed and hesitant.

She is like the gold dissolved in the ocean—
 a house of gold, floated apart—

one indigo night she might
 sit up in bed, turn to face herself,
 leaning in until she touches foreheads,
eyes open, the glass of her corneas just
 brushing.
She may find her pupils are black like holes in a riverbank,
glinting and unafraid.

—

Her forearms shudder, thick tears drip from her feet.
 Each finger is a cry as she reaches
toward you.

 Afterward, recomposed, watch her using forgetfulness
 like a horn-handled brush
 to smooth her hair.

—

Walking all day repeating odd phrases,
whispering *proud navies proud navies proud navies proud navies*—

words that ring in the bell of her body—
undecided and young. Perhaps one mouth echoes

the other, but this is a logic we cannot unravel:
call it “Primacy, or Which Half May Rule.”

—

If we must say she is a like tree—
 pine, cherry, birch or myrtle?—

then let us picture both halves:

the crown and its mirror
projected belowground,

nut-brown birds twittering and the worms
swimming through soil, gnawing away.

The library of July

When I cross-reference your face
in the book of summer I find also

*shifting pennies of light lanced through trees
and to be pierced with rain—*

in the herbarium I consulted
the folios of flowers, the drawers of dried birds

and the close-winged wrens called from their case:
we have cotton wads for eyes and

noli me tangere; quit this clinging.
For days I watched you across tables,

saw your pain rise and fall under your plaid shirt.
Now what's left? This tender

ligature, this book of veins.
Please do not think I have forgotten

how we walked across poorly painted
parking lots, slipping through the sick pulse

of cicadas with the moon over our left shoulders
like a single blind eye—those nights

when the world was warm and soft
as if we moved inside an open mouth.

Renunciation

So if my loss has thickly
feathered wings—if a golden
plate—if a star—if in a dark room—
if cancer—if my mother's hands are still as two dead doves—
if my father and I washed the white sheets
twice, rinsing the last bitter stain of urine—
if we folded them together, arms outstretched, moving
toward each other so the corners met—

how deeply can we be cut
before touching bone. What spins
the small white web across.

Loss comes to me
slight-shouldered—knot of light—
something cold, unsound
veiling the face of water—
like this:

we have to break the ice
to measure how thick it is.

The absence of flowers

The hospital bed an unfolded page,
her body irradiated and not

the kind that means splendor,
and then the jars

of fluid like beef broth
sucked from her lungs, everything

baring itself, the three bones
of her knee, the thin skin

at the back of her
skull, and sheets of film

printed with the white
clasp of ribs and

that was supposed
to tell her why it hurt

—

Your mother will die
on a Tuesday.

At 3 am you'll wait for two men
in ill-fitting suits to arrive.

They'll zip her into a white bag
and one man will gather

her hundred pounds
to his chest as he steps down the stairs—

the five of you huddling
in other rooms.

Remember? the stairs that it took her half an hour to climb
and the chair on the landing

and you couldn't do it for her, every white spindle
of the banister like a lonely bone

and the pain that you didn't understand
that one mercy

—

and how you sang
tunelessly in the floral

waiting room until your sister

screamed at you to stop—

how your mother didn't notice the light

that crept from the bedside
table to tremble on her thin left arm, how she
couldn't speak

without gasping and found it
easier to sing, how she hummed

her day to you over the phone—

what hurt, what didn't,

to the tune of the hymn

that asks for the song
of a flaming tongue

—

He will ask for help
going through her clothes

and hang the few pieces you
want to keep in your closet,

carefully zipped in white garment bags—

each dress in its own polyester shroud.

—

She hadn't seen the stars in months
and sometimes she'd confuse the streetlamp
with the moon

and don't tell her otherwise
if her arms are yellow
in the hospital light

but Please
you said Shave my head with your yellow arms
you did it
so God would listen

—

and that one incision
never healed

and the stitches across
its little mouth
the nurse brimmed with honey again
and again
and where it opened to—
underneath everything grew wildly—

and how it bloomed in the spaces
where her body had held you—

Now you hold the waxy lipstick,
the powders, the pencil

she used to draw
on her eyebrows after

the chemo and sling her pearls
around your neck.

You're hardening moonlight around
what's foreign inside you,

trying to build milky reliquaries

—

for each letter of your mother's name.

What if you're mining your loss
like a broken hillside, pulling out

the seams of silver—pencil lines
written under soil—and if you say

you put your hand through
the window more for the gesture

of it, will the wind stop hissing
through that empty star?

—

Weren't you heaping bright flowers

every day and weren't they cold and white—

and where could you put them when

the petals dried, wrinkled like sick skin,
and papered down—how can you rewrite

the flowers and why do the marks
fall through the page and where was she then—

what haven't you forgotten and why

is there no one word that means

the absence of flowers and also
a thin arm with broken veins—

—

Sometimes she'd wake
with a half-cry—something

stifling her, a tightening weave,
the threads to keep her safe:

our love's lonely and slow lacerations.
She was trying to untie her gown,

drop the lilies from her
palms, leave her body full

of only the coldest light.
But she was born from a bloody body,

and you were born from a bloody body.
You: just as veined and written in red

as you watch a sweaty man
in a dirty t-shirt lower

the box of her
into the hole—

to reach to the bottom
of the little pit he has

to lie on his side, his whole arm

—

lost in the ground.

The port in her chest was a useful one
plastic tapped into her skin after arm veins'
siege and collapse
and those small red & white cells
stopped blooming inside her so we could call her
anemic and full of unopened roses

—

What part was gentle

they scooped her womb out like they would a grapefruit
serrated silver—membranes cut—

like thieves they touched her with gloved hands
we told her she couldn't say No

—

Push the tube through that hole in her side
circle the tender lung
siphon the pulmonary fluid like gas from the most delicate tank
put your mouth to it
suck suck
if you gave her a glass of it
she'd trust you and drink it

My father is a nightjar

fist-sized, gravel-colored,
bands of white on his wings.
He does not sing his whirring
wordless song to me.
So with kitchen shears I split
him open, pin back the feathered
flaps, clip thread-thin ribs.
I pull them apart—
bare a tiny tongue-shaped
heart pulsing away.
It asks wetly from the cavity
How far are you willing to take this?
His eye—the dome of a dark drop—
pleads *Stop trying to touch inside my pain.*

CHAPTER II

“with the fling of iron, and the harshness of rending of silk”

look in the cupboard all the glasses have fallen
to confusing stars the plates are a nest of shards

and the spider in the corner has been spinning some
small monstrous sac while you insist on feeding her

powdery moths plucked from porchlight & despite
all this I tell myself the rooms will change for us

while in the closet our shirts are tearing their own seams

“it began to put on a darknesse, and to decline to softnesse”

what if I shimmied into

your room in a coat of junco wings
what if as you undressed me each wing took black flight?
my steps like tiny sips
my body all blood-knot & bone

often I bruise grasses

& they have the sense

to smell sweet & stay silent

“and while he told the sands of his hour-glass, or the throbs and little beatings of his watch”

when I say without urgency
Her hair is cold so he knows

she's been out walking alone
carrying her shaking hands you will take it

to mean I have only been thinking
in the present perfect continuous tense

& I'm telling you this so that
if I say *She must accept the infinite*

distances for him to be whole against
a blown-out white sky & her eyes seem

several miles away you know what I mean
is *Let's make promises & feed*

them like pets We can hold them still
We can give them names

“without wings”

so the branch that hesitated before breaking
was the whiteness of the underside of her arms
 he kept falling like rain
creeping inside the fruit

walking the outline of an island
 she wanted him in slices
snapping whatever stood in her way
 whipped grasses leaving a broken
 path all tender green
her touch such a perfect knife

“where you shall find the rooms dressed up with melancholic arts”

the windows stood around his room
& no one told them to stop opening
their mouths full of old sun which
meant every stick of furniture
crouched brilliant on the worn wood floor
& if there was love it would do
its dirty work here where everything is secondhand
I asked the lamps to take off their shoes told the
darkened oil paintings to stop
shrugging into their thin yellow coats wanted to hold
the room still for a little longer
to remember the cries of light

“colored like the first springing of the morning”

she wanted to be something they could share
to tell him about the ways she'd learned to burn
& if he was someone who knew how to be fallow
she wanted to let her dead mother lie quietly in the other room
with a kind of opened throat smiling
slipping back & forth between the girl
& her lover who knew when not to bloom

“she desired to know how to die”

that summer love was a pit to fall in

I took you out back
showed you the holes I'd dug & you called them beautiful
you stepped down into the throats of earth
I told you to wait there gave whole days to sifting soil
while you practiced your love belowground
making yourself gloves
of stone
the colder your touch the more I wanted it

**“for we die but once; and therefore it will be necessary that our skill
be more exact”**

the hours—how does he spend them

yesterday he tried on different names

& what did the clothes in the closet say

sometimes the light falls suddenly &
purples its knee

will there be another one bruised like this

I wanted to believe it

where did the light go with its many blades

I told him *The bright world is always trying
to break through*

“the thousand thousand of accidents in the world”

if he is bright as a dove's neck
& tells her puns about Super8
motels if he remembers a delicate
machinery while she picks the seams
from her best dresses (if across
the street workers at Industries of the Blind
are making pens attached to chains
& 6-ply cotton mops) & she—loving the third-
person-ness of it—wonders if *Safety* means
Death-while-in-Love—considers all the constructions
she could delicately destroy
& though he is far away he holds
her restless while she asks for rooms without roofs or walls
where no one says *Can you help me*—that directness

“and they that live longest on the face of the waters are in perpetual motion, restless and uneasy”

is this the poem where he holds
her for hours while the disbelieving
moon taps at his window & when do the clothes
in the closet wake up & point
did he stand in refrigerator light
& if his shoulders tighten as he moves over her
if the strings of muscle in his shoulders
are the shapes river water takes as it sweeps over rock
is this when she says that lonely word
or when she asks what converses
in the dark of his jaw
can she kiss the synapse-speed of him
& still think he will pull the pearls of her
spine apart he creeps inside
the four rooms of her heart he does his best
to remember the prism of her
he holds her so tightly no light gets in

**“not as nature gives us rivers, enough to drown us, but drop by drop,
minute after minute”**

she will consider his gaze a colorless moth
the kind that flutters about the eyes
of sleeping birds his arms
like the hum around a thin glass rim
& the scent of clipped rhododendron leaves

she asks he stay unknowable in morning hours
while the day drops around him
not any shade of blue in other rooms

she reclines inlaid
with pieces of a summer night
he set them in her sternum behind
a small piece of smudged glass

skin snicked apart a space made
he didn't care how much it hurt & she loved him for it

she keeps on living & he switches on the fireflies

“to be buried in the lap of their kindred earth”

sometimes she tried for him

a mostly pretty thing
a kind of panting with porcelain skin

if you hold your eyes
in your palms like almonds
delicious like that

like being fucked like not waking up

**“though thou breakest me in pieces, my hope is, thou wilt gather me
up”**

please do not write again
to tell me how you brush
at the stars & they never bloom
I've been taking pills
 & steps
what I mean is I'm not sure
where this ends except
both of us similarly shattered
the story of how to be broken an accidental map
like how I can only really listen to music
if it's on in the other room

CHAPTER III

Seven kinds of longing

That evening the pecan
tree was lanced
through with a hundred
lightning bugs' whispers
of light—the low-down
zodiac of summer nights.
Five blinked through
the open window
into my room,
their glow like
the squeeze of a bright
hand—not in celebration,
not to signal climax, but
a voiceless call
before the beloved
is even named.
That is how
it was with us—
peeling ourselves into
stars before we ever touched.
The sky darkened
over us, and I
could imagine we'd
singed it with
our aimless brilliance.

The Sea That Has Become Known

*For full indeed is the earth of woes, and full the sea.
-Hesiod*

Metal rovers plumb
the white depths above
looking like insects
or microwaves on treads.
Now I've gone and done it—
put a microwave in a song
about the moon!

I've launched some things
up there as well:
coat of colors,
bitter herbs,
the letters I didn't light,
used tissues, a plaid scarf sodden with tears.

That's what they're talking
about when they say
the moon is full.
A bright knob
that I'll reach up
and pull
if I'm brave enough
or liquored up—
button of tears
or a brilliant bullethole.

Thirst

the white tomato flowers are too clean to touch
she plucks suckers stakes the manic sprawl
mixes pelleted pigs' blood into the dirt—

—

offering others so her fruit will ripen

she was born with a hole in her heart—men
white-armored—
 listened coldy to it fluttering like a nicked moth

the rust drip fell to her feet
reddening her soles it flattened her tip-toe dance

filling the complexity of her ankle
she watered herself
 darkly until the doctors plugged it up

—

she found the sink by its sound
dripping keeping her awake

the bowl cradled a ragged pearl
a bar of soap water-swollen white-bloomed to
twice its size
flaking layers of glycerin and ash

The island city
for Emma

Last year I shed my delicate chains
of light, arrived bare-necked at your door *the poet said,*
peering with her friend—an activist and a doctor—
into a small café made to look
like a thin alleyway in Greece—
striped awnings sloping from muraled walls,
bougainvillea thriving in the olive-
scented dark. The friend replied

I wanted to reduce myself to a single flame.
You knew me then, thin-armed and equivocal.

They stepped over the threshold together;
the poet held her friend's hand, stroking tender bone.
Shall we call that your story?

Back then I would have asked you
if I could live in your heart,
curled up, slight, stretching a hand
through your vena cava on waking.

The café ceiling is splattered with stars.
I want to learn one truth to tell you—
a phrase repeated like sunrise
across your closed lids.
Cobblestones crudely painted across
the café's concrete floor, this foundation
rests on the skin of the island city
like one scale on the back of a beast
that breathes with eight million mouths.
Will you hold them all? *she asks.*

I've spent years developing a capacity
for pain. Now with every pulse
I feel myself dissolving into praise.

Letter to a young girl

My darling with your tantrums
and long dark hair—
I was just remembering last Thanksgiving
when you asked me why we only celebrated white people
coming to America: Chris Columbus, John Smith,
the Pilgrims. Have I told you
that the pilot of the *Santa Maria* was
called El Negro? A black man
charting the early crossings to this shore.
The other routes to arriving here.
Remember the coyotes ducking
border guards at night,
silently spinning tires
across sand, men stuffed into their
empty gastanks. And young girls
with small hips and almond eyes
brought across the Pacific to brothels on the plains—
renamed *Cherry Blossom* or *Pearl Dragon*.
I thought of the fat bellies of ships
on the Atlantic full of fettered men and women
and what kind of holiday that would be.
I bet you could almost make it festive—
construction paper chains
bound at our wrists that we break every year
before sitting down to eat.
Construction paper crowns on our heads.

Prayer

You set it flowing:
the river below the river—
swift and silent as desire.
Just to dip a hand in it—
to hold a fingertip to my mouth—

still chilled. To be all undone,
secret swaying like arms of waterweed—
almost weightless in the rush to the sea.
To be swept along.

A light broke from heaven

I want to stop letting birds into
every poem, folding you
among clutches of flecked eggs
and their nests of wool and human hair.

—

When you call me
the tremor of the phone in my hand

is nothing like the gasping of a little wren.

—

The wafer did not float down to my tongue
like a feather. Some hand
placed it there—cuticle-ripped
and darkly veined.

—

When we speak
we obliterate the birdsong.

I kneel to pray, and the lights
above me are nothing like doves.

Lovers and the B-theory of time

She said "I want to watch the animals,
the ones with gorgeous
fur and narrow mouths."

He snatched moths
from the ceiling, shaking
their wingdust over his plate of eggs, while
she continued to draw her map,
tracing in marker
the blue of veins across her thighs. She wanted
to turn herself inside out, to reveal her
hidden structures.

"What makes a river holy?" he asks as he slices
persimmon after persimmon, searching
for the sunset with the slimness of his knife.

He keeps trying to forget the texture of
her right knee and the four freckles on her upper lip.

Later he will pass the evening
back and forth with her, looking for what
still needs a master or a name.

Still life with longing and a dragon

For an hour the train refuses to lumber away,
but at every breath I leave you. A woman in a purple sweater
lowers herself next to me,

and types with two fingers, writing fantasy.
Her Pale Knight rattles.
He pauses to hold out a mailed hand.

A maiden in diaphanous sleeves
is lifted from the divan.
We slip under the interstate. The woman

plucks away; the action rises;
the knight touches a white breast like a gibbous moon.
I pull a loose thread at the hem of my shirt, unravel

the serged seam—bending to cut its thin cursive with my teeth.
I smell the woman's stale breath on every exhale.
Past cypress swamp choked

with deadfall, bark gone—skin-slipped
and smooth. The maiden tosses
a falcon into the sun.

A girl keeps on peeking over the seat;
I try to smile back.
We pass Towel Town and Discount Shoez.

Broken safety glass sugars
this platform and the knight drops his breastplate
into the rushes on the castle floor.

The windowglass is sunlit and warm as skin. I lean my head against it,
watching six kids play soccer on a dusty diamond.
Her hair is moonlight on the wolfskin rug.

We pass red awnings, a carefully kept yard planted
with plastic begonias, and a swirl
of silver knights

taking a jousting tournament very seriously;
the great ladies are politely bored. One heart

is lanced through, splinter-stung and stopped.

No one blinks. From here a Quonset hut looks like a tin can, half-buried.

The maiden drops a single tear.

Next the knight bites the maiden's curving neck in a backyard

piled with playhouses and muscle cars on blocks.

A teenager sits in a wheel-less Camaro,
stroking its chrome

as if it were a horse's neck. The girl in front of me walks

her pink-crowned princess kitten doll
across the seatback, making it

bow and lick its paw solemnly.

She is the priestess of its fate as
shadows lengthen, sharp as knives.

He rides toward a dragon, leagues to go

and already in his hand the broadsword, unsheathed.

Gravestones lick the sunset,

holding under their tongues

the wormy boxes, the satin, the bones.

This small platform has a slate roof

and globe lights like stoppered suns.

Benches without backs.

Dragonfire blazes the valley,

peeling white paint from porches,

and I think the maiden will cut her moonlight hair

on a moonless night and offer its length

to the dragon, though it cannot swallow back its fire

or honor her gift. The woman

next to me types and sighs.

The knight is always riding away.

The maiden is always desiring.

And the stones of this castle refuse to burn.

Withdrawn

With my burning thirst
my empty womb
I imagined myself an anchorite

alone unloading the dishwasher
humming tunelessly
sweeping the house bare

love seeping out of everywhere
surely some of it
reaching heaven

I could give you stories
the desert the darkness
the arrow and ecstasy

the voice rumbling below sound
the bright flash every time
I blink, as if the world

rearranged itself
every time I look away
bodies that break through, throwing

longstemmed lilies over their bright shoulders
like shepherd's crooks
as they speak to me

in the language of light
which I can hardly comprehend
then they are gone

and I persist,
distilled into a cry
scribbling *transform me*

over and over until it becomes illegible
paper silver with pencil marks

NOTES

The quoted titles are sourced from Jeremy Taylor's *The Rules and Exercises of Holy Dying* (1651).

Thanks to the Aurorean, where "*The Sea that Has Become Known*" was first published and CALYX, where "The library of July" is forthcoming.